Games / Anime / Multimedia

play

Crash is back in action and we've got the scoop!

ODIN SPHERE

ATLUS' STUNNING NEW ACTION-RPG MARKS THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN OF CONSOLE 2D

May 2007
U.S. $5.99 CAN $7.99

05 >
0 714 86 03836 8

Etrian Odyssey™

You don't know where you are...

But you know where It is. The behemoth is only five steps behind and gaining. Do you have time to check your hastily scrawled map for an exit, or should you have your party stand and fight? In the Labyrinth of Etrian Odyssey, every choice is yours...

Create your own party from 9 classes, which can be customized down to their individual skills. Create your own dungeon maps using the Nintendo DS stylus. Create your own adventure, but beware: the Labyrinth is full of monsters who seek only to destroy!

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Mild Fantasy Violence
Mild Suggestive Themes

NINTENDO DS™

ATLUS®
WWW.ATLUS.COM

© 2007 ATLUS Licensed to and published by Atlus USA.
™, ® and Nintendo DS logo are trademarks of Nintendo. © 2004 Nintendo. The rating icons are trademarks of the Entertainment Software Association.

In the Labyrinth of Etrian Odyssey, every choice is yours...

Mass Effect Engine © 2002-2007 BioWare Corp. All rights reserved. BioWare Corp., the BioWare Corp. logo, BioWare and the BioWare logo, Mass Effect and the Mass Effect logo, and the Mass Effect Engine are either registered trademarks or trademarks of BioWare Corp. in the United States and/or other countries. © 2007 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved. Microsoft, the Microsoft Game Studios logo, Xbox and the Xbox logos are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries.

Jump in.

Saren's forces are spreading. And their goal is clear: the extermination of all organic life. How do you decide who to save? Who to let perish? Life and death decisions await at every stop as you scour a universe of over 32 stars and planets. Don't forget your map. **xbox.com/masseffect**

XBOX 360 LIVE

Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

65

Power to the people

I recently took part in a very interesting panel discussion hosted by the San Diego division of the IGDA in which I, along with 5 other key members of the press, were given the opportunity to address an amphitheater full of developers followed by a Q & A period. It made for a fascinating evening to say the least. While I certainly enjoyed the opportunity to voice my opinions and represent our readers, I thought it might be interesting to give you a shot at some of the main topics to see how close I came, and also to give the developers an opportunity to hear it straight from the source. Answer as many or as few as you want and send them to letters@playmagazine.com. So without further ado, the questions:

1) How important is realism to next-gen?
2) What do you consider realism?
3) If a game is visually appealing, but doesn't make a step forward from a gameplay perspective, how do you treat it in terms of ratings?
4) What if a game is advanced from a storytelling or gameplay perspective, but not graphics? Is it next-gen, or just a good game?
5)What does your average reader consider next-gen, from your experience? Is the concept important to them?
6) How important is the story and writing?
7) With Xbox Live Arcade, virtual console, and Sony's download services, is it important that a game appear to be next-gen at all?
8) Is multiplayer necessary for next-gen? What makes a next-gen MMO, or are MMOs and social interaction games by definition next-gen?
9) Name three things you hoped you'd see come out of the next generation, but haven't yet.
10) When do you anticipate we'll be able to stop using the word? All the new consoles are out now. Do we have to wait for the PS2 to die?
11) What game do you consider to be truly next-gen

Beyond that, enjoy what I think is one of our best ever, and as always, you've always got my ear.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

Editorial

Editor In Chief **Dave Halverson**
Executive Editor **Brady Fiechter**
Senior Editors **Greg Orlando, Casey Loe**
Associate Editors **Heather Campbell, Eric Patterson**
Associate Anime Editor **Bill Gray**
PC Editor **Mike Griffin**
Japanese Correspondents **Nick Des Barres, Dai Kohama**
Copy Editor **Daniel Campisi**
Original art by **Dany Orizio**

Design

Art Director **Michael Hobbs**
Associate Art Director **Chin "Nelson" Lui**

Advertising and Sales

Publisher **Michael Eisenberg**
Contact **Michael Eisenberg**
sales@playmagazine.com
Tel 818.707.7786 Ext 102
Fax 818.707.7212

play magazine online

Online Content Manager **Eric Patterson**
webmaster@playmagazine.com

Corporate

Director Of Operations **Julie Halverson**
jhalverson@playmagazine.com
818.707.7786 ext.104

VP of Sales & Marketing **Michael Eisenberg**
meisenberg@playmagazine.com

Administrative Assistant **Daniel Campisi**
dcampisi@playmagazine.com

Subscriptions and Customer Service
(in U.S.) 800-694-6506
(outside U.S.) 818-487-2036
email: play@espcomp.com

play magazine Offices
Fusion Publishing, Inc.
29229 Canwood St., Suite 200
Agoura Hills, Ca 91301
Tel 818.707.7786 Fax 818.707.7212

play magazine partner

ALIENWARE
HIGH-PERFORMANCE SYSTEMS

Legal Mumbo Jumbo

PLAY™ (ISSN 1537-7539) is published monthly by Fusion Publishing, Inc., 29229 Canwood St., Suite 200, Agoura Hills, CA 91301. Volume 6, Issue 5. Single issue rates: $5.99, yearly newsstand value: $71.88. The one year (12 issue) subscription rate is $19.99 in the U.S., $44.99 in Canada, and $64.99 in all other foreign locales. Checks must be made payable in U.S. currency only to PLAY. Send address changes to: P.O. BOX 16567, North Hollywood, CA 91615-9684 or email play@espcomp.com For subscription service questions, call (800)694-6506. We periodically make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings, please write to us and include a copy of your mailing label. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue, as well as for any subscription changes to take place on any existing subscription. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials; all unsolicited material becomes the property of Fusion Publishing, Inc. Without limiting the rights of copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written notice of Fusion publishing, Inc. To reuse any material in this publication, obtain a permission request form by contacting Fusion Publishing, Inc. at (818)707-7786 [phone] or (818)707-7212 [fax]. © Fusion Publishing, Inc. All Rights Reserved, Play™, Fusion Publishing™, Play: Girls of Gaming™, Play: The Calendar™, Fusion Publishing Presents™ are trademarks and copyrights of Fusion Publishing, Inc.™ and © for all other products and the characters contained therein are owned by the respective trademark and copyright owners. All materials listed in this magazine are subject to manufacturers change and the publisher assumes no responsibility for such changes.

MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE BASKETBALL.

GOT GAME? PROVE IT ONLINE AGAINST THOUSANDS.

FREE ONLINE PLAY* AT
FreeStyleStreetBasketball.com

Play against real people!

Make amazing alley oops and dunks!

Improve skills with new gear!

*No Subscription Fee Required.
Player responsible for all applicable internet fees.

EVERYONE
E
Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Game Experience May Change During Online Play

PC CD-ROM ONLINE SOFTWARE

SIERRA Online

JCE

Copyright © 2004-2007 JC Entertainment, Inc. All rights reserved. FreeStyle and the FreeStyle logo are trademarks of JC Entertainment, Inc. Published by Sierra Online, a division of Vivendi Games, Inc. Sierra and the Sierra logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of Sierra Entertainment in the U.S. and/or other countries and are used under license. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners.

FREE STYLE STREET BASKETBALL™

contents

010 **Ink**
Sony welcomes you "Home"

012 **Database**
Crunching the numbers

014 **Cover Story**
Odin Sphere
Meet your new favorite action RPG...EVER

024 **Previews**
Return of the Bandicoot!!

057 **Reviews**
Zombies! Don't let them eat your neighbors

066 **Play Mobile**
Cyborgs and sluts!

068 **Play Japan**
Bigger, badder, can't get any better

078 **Play PC**
Mike G. lays down 8 killer pages

087 **Play Anime**
Afro Samurai, Tsubasa, Kurau and Blood +!!

094 **Now Reading**
She came, she has a saw...

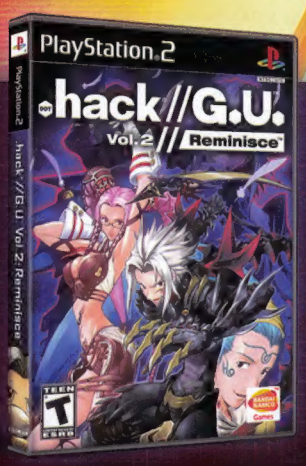
095 **Media**
Ghouls 'n' Gremlins

096 **Back of the Book**
Proceed with caution

STOP THE SPREAD OF EVIL

THE YEAR IS 2017, AND SERVERS OF THE POPULAR VIDEO GAME "THE WORLD" ARE INFECTED WITH A DANGEROUS ENTITY. IT IS SPREADING. YOU MUST HUNT IT DOWN AND DESTROY IT. WITH NEW WEAPONS AND NEW FIGHTING ABILITIES YOU WON'T WANT TO LEAVE "THE WORLD" AGAIN!

HACK INTO: WWW.DOTHACK.COM/GU



INTENSE REAL TIME FIGHTING

CUSTOMIZABLE WEAPONS

EPIC, ORIGINAL STORYLINE

IN STORES MAY 2007

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Alcohol Reference
Fantasy Violence
Language
Suggestive Themes

WATCH THE NEW ANIME
.hack//Roots

PlayStation.2

Cyber Connect2 Co.,Ltd. GAMESOFT DEVELOPMENT COMPANY

BANDAI NAMCO Games

.hack® //G.U.™ & © 2007 NAMCO BANDAI. © 2007 NAMCO BANDAI Games Inc. Reminisce is a trademark of NAMCO BANDAI Games America. NAMCO BANDAI Games logo is a trademark of NAMCO BANDAI. Published and distributed by NAMCO BANDAI Games America Inc. .hack and related characters, names, logos, distinctive likenesses, drawings and other images contained in this product are the exclusive property of NAMCO BANDAI. Used under license from NAMCO BANDAI. All rights reserved. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association. All other trademarks and trademark names are the properties of their respective owners.

playback

May 2007

letters@playmagazine.com

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Army of anyone

I find myself constantly wondering when I'm going to see a call to arms from you/Play. I think there are a lot of us out there that have meaningful things to say and contribute to gaming, as, dare I say, "older gamers," but see very little mainstream representation of a more mature, balanced perspective. Just by way of a couple quick examples, if you look at the Spike TV network, and to a lesser degree G4, they seem very heavily slanted towards a very young crowd. And whenever they cover a topic where they actually have a chance of saying something meaningful, like the episode on ESRB ratings and mature content in video games, they reduce the program to crap-tacular sound-byte level dialogue that does absolutely NOTHING to advance the industry.

Or if you look at the recent interview with the "Calling All Cars" designer (I don't have the issue in front of me atm), he frankly seems apologetic that he's interested in making games for ppl that don't have 40 hours/week to game. He seems to feel less "hardcore" now that he has a family and kids, but I say screw that! J I am 38, I have a wife, a job, family commitments, and yes DAMNIT! I am a gamer and I'm here to stay and I want great games where someone was actually thinking of me when they made them! Unless gamers like us are willing to give up on games like Psychonauts, Beyond Good & Evil, Okami, etc. and cede the field to gangster rappers braining prostitutes with lead pipes, we need to be heard.

Anyways, I'd love to see Play magazine do something to help change the industry, b/c I think voices like yours need to be heard more clearly and frequently by the industry.

Brian

Settling the score: Part 2

Scores are necessary and that is unfortunate.

When people pick up gaming magazines, they usually flip through the pages until they get to the reviews. Next, they go through the scores to see what the magazine thinks of the games that the reader is looking forward to playing. Is Crackdown all that it could be? Is God of War II as good as the original? Does VF5 live up to the hype? The problem is that scores don't usually help a lot of games, they seem to only hurt. Most looking at scores already know what they want to play and so scores only serve as validation. Seldom does one go out and pick up a game that they were not interested in prior to high scores being released. Okami, Elite Beat Agents, and Viva Pinata are games that were media darlings and none sold near where they should have with all the praise each received. This isn't anything new as each year there are Game of Year caliber titles that get passed over at retail as Psychonauts and Ico fans know first hand. So high scores don't necessarily sell software, but low scores can stop sales in some cases. MotorStorm is a title that many have been looking forward to with great anticipation. First comes the Play Magazine review in which the game receives a perfect 10 validating many gamers' expectations that this title is going to be the blockbuster they were hoping. But they are quickly brought down as each day new outlets put out reviews that tend to get lower and lower until the gamer gets confused and upset. Is the game a 10 or a 7.5? It doesn't help that some places are trying to reinvent the scoring scale which adds more confusion. I think that people are actually starting to turn away from the professional reviews. Isn't it interesting that many are reading non-professional impressions that do not have scores, but they probably wouldn't read a magazine with professional written reviews that do not have scores? I hear the complaints from the professional reviewers that too many readers do not actually read the text in their reviews and it is true to some extent, but I think it is more likely that people aren't willing to listen to a reviewer's explanation of a score they are disappointed with. People begin by reading the conclusion which is the score and then read the text to see how the reviewer reached that conclusion. More than likely during their reading, they focus more on the negatives pointed out to see why a game got points knocked off. If you think Zelda: Twilight Princess deserves a 10 and you see it receive a 8.5 from a reviewer, you probably are not going to read the text of the review with an open mind. Another thing playing into all of this is that we are getting to see a little more of the personalities that cover this industry as blogs and podcasts become standard. We hear how many of these journalists haven't played the first God of War and how many can't stand the PSP. We hear how Zelda has not evolved and how no game should receive a 10 as no game is perfect. We hear system war debates by the experts that sound no different and just as sad as a bunch of kids on any gaming message board. We hear an editor that may or may not be dating the head of a company's marketing department, throw his colleagues under the bus for not giving his favorite game of 2006, the Game of the Year award. How can I take seriously a review handed out by an editor who says I would only buy a PS3 if it was $200 and called a Wii? There is just so much negativity in the gaming press that ranges from the reviews that seems to center on the games flaws, to the news that seem to contain nothing but analysis of who is putting which foot in their mouth this week. I understand that some argue that this is the direction that the gaming media needs to go to show that they are legitimate and not in bed with the different companies but is hard hitting news what we want out of our hobby's media? This is a hobby, correct? An enthusiasts press. Is the press that covers model trains as negative as the gaming media? I don't know but the scores need to stay as people out there need numbers to argue over. That is what it comes down to, gamers need a number to argue over.

Maybe it is time to finally switch to the two person thumbs up thumbs down review model...now there's an idea.

Sean F

"...yes DAMNIT! I am a gamer and I'm here to stay..."

Just wanted to write in response to your March 2007 Editorial about "What's in a number?" It's a great topic to discuss, and definitely worth talking about. First off, I'm a long-time, old-school gamer from Atari 2600 to present day. E. Storm and Nick Rox were a big part of the impressionable era in my life. :) And I read every word in the Play Magazine reviews. But given all that, I think "numbers" and "ratings" are just an inherent necessity in our culture today, as sad or frustrating as it seems. I read every word and appreciate all the insight, but given the type of society we're in now, where the Internet, where Instant Messaging, where cell phones with Walkie Talkie come into play, all this has pushed and conditioned many people (and especially the younger generations) to want instant gratification NOW! There are ratings and rankings for everything, from Sports Teams to Hotel and Restaurant Ratings and much more.

I feel your pain about a single "number" undermining what's being written, but I think it's an evil necessity today. However, one thing that helps Play Magazine's Reviews (over the competition) is the nice, quick, and easy to read " + " and " - " comments you add in addition to the numerical score. That helps explain a few more things to those that may not read every word.

A few last comments if I may: I LOVE your "Play Japan" section with Nick Rox and Dai-san. Very cool stuff, and even if they review a game that may come out later to the U.S., it's always good to get an early Import Review (regardless of if it's guaranteed to come over or not). This month's Japan reviews of Vampire Rain and Seiken Densetsu 4 brought flashbacks of the old-school days when I'd read the latest import reviews from E. Storm and crew, getting me excited (or saving me money) in the process. That's definitely an angle you have over the competition, as well as Play Anime!

Keep up the great work,

Ken

I wanted to respond to Dave's editorial regarding game scores in the March issue of Play. I realize this is probably an old subject by now, but figured I'd throw in my two cents anyway. I'm somewhat divided on the subject.

I definitely agree with the magazine's policy of having people that know and love a particular game type/genre be the ones that review the games. It only makes sense that those that understand and enjoy the conventions and gameplay of particular kinds of games are those that can provide the best critical assessment of how well a game succeeds within those conventions (or, as in the best games, by subverting and mutating them as the developers feel appropriate).

On the other hand, fans can sometimes overlook what they consider minor issues that may matter more to those that aren't as enamored of the genre.

Additionally, they may be more focused on the minutiae that differentiate different examples of particular types of games that, while significant to the hardcore, may not matter to most people. Obviously, an appropriately self-aware and conscientious reviewer can overcome those issues, but I think we all know that not everyone that writes reviews could be called either self-aware or conscientious. Kurt A.

THE LEGEND RETURNS
LARA CROFT
TOMB
RAIDER
ANNIVERSARY
WWW.TOMBRAIDER.COM

PlayStation 3 is where Home is...

Welcome to the future

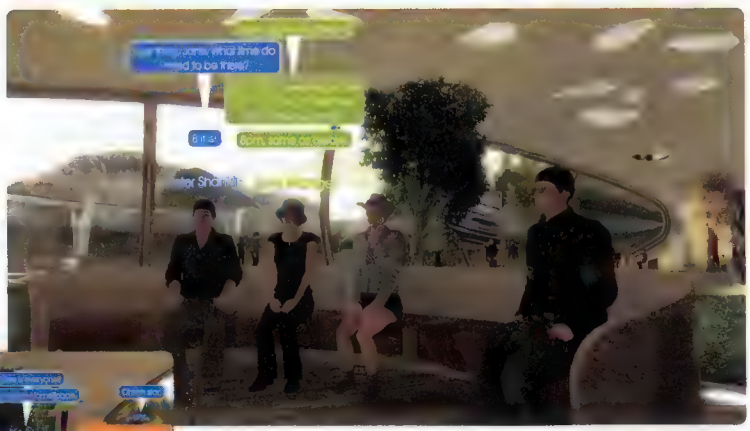
Call it what you will: a griefer's paradise in the making, Sony's master stroke, a Second Life rip-off, but Home caught people's attention at the Game Developers Conference.

Home is Sony's new avatar-based online community for PlayStation 3 owners. It is, for all intents and purposes, a console version of the PC-based community Second Life; people can create a character, customize him or her, and then explore a virtual world.

This is Sony's most forceful blast in the war for online superiority, and likely a direct response to Microsoft's Xbox Live service. Unlike Xbox 360, Home has no monthly subscription fee associated with it. The caveat, of course, is that Home will feature advertisements aplenty—and it will certainly cost, say, a little bit extra to purchase a special shirt for a character.

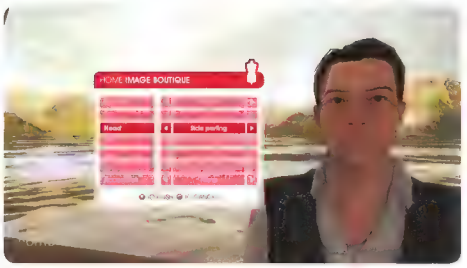
The emphasis here is on socialization. People in home will be able to chat with other users via a series of simple phrases selected by the PlayStation 3's Sixaxis controller, via a USB keyboard plugged into the console, or by voice chat with a headset. Games such as pool and bowling can be played within Home as well, and less social diversions such as arcade games are also included.

> "This is Sony's most forceful blast in the war for online superiority, and likely a direct response to Microsoft's Xbox Live..."



"The Central Lounge is the large social meeting space and is your initial starting point in Home. Communication is key in Home, and there are many simple ways to get to know people. Emotes are animations that get your point across fast. You can access short phrases using Quick Write, or if you have something big to say you can type with a Virtual or USB keyboard, or talk with a Bluetooth headset."

Each Home user will have access to a private space. This space, can be decorated with various wallpapers, pieces of furniture, and electronics. Interestingly, this private space can be further personalized with pictures, videos, and MP3s stored on a PlayStation 3. At one point during Home's debut, Sony representatives took a picture of the crowd with a digital camera. The picture was then transferred to a PlayStation 3 and, finally, pasted onto a picture on the wall in Home. Stereos in Home will pump out music from a player's collection. TV screens can play videos; for the demo, a trailer of, not surprisingly, Sony Pictures' *Spider-Man 3* was attached to a TV and then left to run for a bit. In an odd digression, Sony

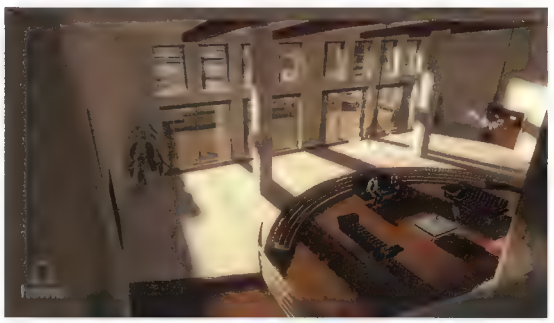


"Each person can customize their clothes and facial characteristics, with millions of potential combinations."

representatives then took the TV and dropped it down a flight of steps showing that objects in Home are all physics-based, but apparently not breakable. The TV continued to play the trailer on its trip down the steps…

A virtual PSP will be used within the context of Home. According to Sony press materials, "Your Virtual PSP gives you access to all the navigation, features, and options of Home." In English, this means the PSP can be used to customize characters, select different parts of Home's world, and select objects such as furniture.

Sony will take players Home this fall, and judgment will certainly be reserved until then. A large-scale beta test of the program will have started by the time this magazine sees print. -Greg Orlando



"Your Home Space is your private apartment where you can invite your friends and family. Your free, initial apartment can be decorated and upgraded to the height of luxury with furniture, accessories, pictures and videos from your own collection."

"The Home Theatre is a shared viewing area for the latest trailers, films and user-created content."

"Your Virtual PSP gives you access to all the navigation, features and options of Home."

LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER ANNIVERSARY

WWW.TOMBRAIDER.COM

TEEN T
Mild Suggestive Themes
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Available for the PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system and PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) system

Games for Windows

CRYSTAL DYNAMICS

eidos

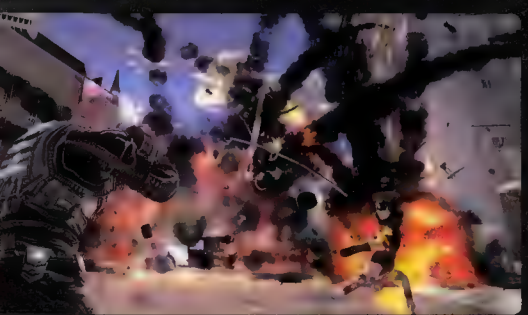
NPD Group

database

may 2007

01	Crackdown Xbox 360 Microsoft
02	PlayW/Remote Wii Nintendo
03	Diddy Kong Racing NDS Nintendo
04	Legend of Zelda Twilight Princess Wii Nintendo
05	Guitar Hero 2 W/Guitar PS2 Activision
06	Gears of War* Xbox 360 Microsoft
07	Lost Planet: Extreme Condition** Xbox 360 Capcom
08	Major League Baseball 2K7 Xbox 360 Take 2 Int.
09	Warioware Smooth Moves Wii Nintendo
10	NBA Street Homecourt Xbox 360 EA
11	New Super Mario Bros. NDS Nintendo
12	Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas*** Xbox 360 Ubisoft
13	Sonic and the Secret Rings Wii Sega
14	Madden NFL 07**** PS2 EA
15	Mario Kart NDS Nintendo
16	Resistance : Fall of Man PS3 SCEA
17	MLB 07: The Show PS2 SCEA
18	God of War PS2 SCEA
19	Final Fantasy VI Advance GBA Nintendo
20	Brain Age: TYBIMAD NDS Nintendo

Two cents: It's great to see Crackdown on top. Definitely a good sign. Must have been that Play cover. Seems like more people are finding Wiis as well. PS3 meanwhile, needs help...With any luck MotorStorm will top next month's list



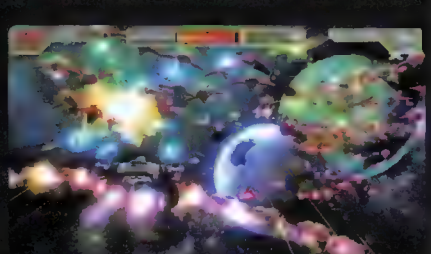
*Includes Collector's Edition
**Includes Bonus Edition
***Includes Limited Edition
****Includes Hall of Fame Edition

01	Diddy Kong Racing Nintendo
02	New Super Mario Bros. Nintendo
03	Mario Kart Nintendo
04	Brain Age TYBIMAD Nintendo
05	Kirbu Squeak Squad Nintendo
06	Nintendogs: Dalmations and Friends Nintendo
07	Yoshi's Island 2 Nintendo
08	Animal Crossing Wild World Nintendo
09	Big Brain Academy Nintendo
10	Nintendogs: Dachsund & Friends Nintendo

Two cents: What does it mean when the entire top 10 is first party? Is that a good thing? I think not. Hope DJ sneaks in there next month!

01	Ratchet and Clank: Size Matters SCEA
02	GTA: Vice City Stories Take 2 Int.
03	Madden NFL 07 EA
04	GTA: Liberty City Stories Take 2 Int.
05	NBA Live 07 EA
06	Need for Speed Most Wanted EA
07	Midnight Club 3: DUB Take 2 Int.
08	Ghost Rider Take 2 Int.
09	Medal of Honor: Heroes EA
10	SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals Fireteam SCEA

Two cents: Ratchet sitting on top of two GTA's...take a mental picture everyone. Ghost Rider is doing well too. It also ranked among the top selling PS2 games in Feb!



01	Play W/Remote Nintendo
02	Legend of Zelda Twilight Princess Nintendo
03	Warioware Smooth Moves Nintendo
04	Sonic and the Secret Rings Sega
05	Rayman Raving Rabbids Ubisoft
06	Madden NFL 07 EA
07	Red Steel Ubisoft
08	Call of Duty 3 Activision
09	Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz Sega
10	Excite Truck Nintendo

Two cents: Anyone see a pattern here? Wii needs some fresh new games STAT...Not ports! Where are the original titles?

With every wish comes true desire.

ATELIER IRIS 3
GRAND PHANTASM

Where worlds collide, a select few are trained to handle any situation. But when mythical treasures appear and personal demons rear their ugly heads, nothing is as simple as it seems. Danger awaits around every corner. Knowledge becomes power, and only the truth will set you free.

- **All-New Alchemy Level System**
  Practice alchemy to improve your skills and discover new items to create.
- **ACCBattle System**
  The Active Cost Card Battle System shows you the exact order of battle, bringing more strategy to every fight.
- **Enemy Symbol Encounter System**
  See enemies on the map. Avoid, destroy, or battle your enemies. With symbol encounters, you decide how to roam.
- **The Guild**
  Accept missions from the Guild to improve your rating as a person and with the Guild.

Available May 2007

TEEN T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol

PlayStation®2

GUST Incorporated

NIS America

www.NISAmerica.com

*Screenshot may not reflect final product.

©2007 GUST CO., LTD. Licensed to and Published by NIS America, Inc. Distributed exclusively by KOEI Corporation. Atelier Iris is a trademark of GUST CO., LTD. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.

ODIN SPHERE

Wondrous stories

every cover story we do is special. Whether it's a sure fire blockbuster, one of our many niche covers, or just plain out of left field, every game that appears on the cover of Play does so for a specific reason. We don't always choose the most obvious games—you already know about those. A big part of what we do is try to expand your horizons beyond the beaten path—terrain that however scenic is all too familiar and on occasion dotted with pitfalls. Be that as it may, after five years of issues I can count the covers that I feel made a real difference on one hand, and of those this is now the most significant. Odin Sphere is a lot of things. Does it represent the next level of 2D gameplay—that very same gameplay that I've been crusading for since it crept away a decade ago? Yes, it does...finally.

And initially I thought that was all it did. Little did I know that Vanillaware had a lot more in mind when they set out down this long forgotten road. On the assumption that graphics alone wouldn't be enough to propel the genre forward, I suppose, what they've shaped is an entirely new breed of action RPG. One that evokes the emotion and splendor that only hand-drawn visuals can, built upon layers of gameplay devices that make playing Odin Sphere like strumming a fine instrument. It's my job now to convey to you what that experience entails to the extent that you'll do anything to get your hands on it. Take a look at these visuals and realize that this is PS2. Now imagine what hand-drawn 2D might look like on PS3 or 360. If for no other reason than graphics alone, cast your vote for 2D. It only takes one hit to set gaming's lumbering marketing machine in motion.

A beautiful war

Assuming the role of Gwendolyn initially—and don't let her looks fool you; she is a fierce Valkyrie warrior—you're cast into a bitter war. The powerful magical relic "Cauldron" that King Valentine has used to sustain a lasting peace over the lands has been compromised and war has broken out between the Fairy Kingdom of Ringford and the warrior nation of Ragnanival, ruled by Demon Lord Odin, who sets forth a plan to conquer Ringford and claim the Cauldron once and for all.

But things are not as they seem and alliances fall to pieces as the game gets underway. Rival Nations hold dark secrets and the lines between righteous and wretched become painfully blurred. What may sound like a token fairy tale wastes no time spiraling into a twist-laden epic with Gwendolyn in its epicenter as events transpire that could bring about any number of outcomes. Over the course of the game you will be privy to five such tales told in-game, skillfully written and masterfully voiced, each as riveting and dramatic as the next. Gwendolyn's struggle alone carries the weight of most entire epics, but by game's end—in order to get the true ending—you will have seen the war from every side; through the eyes of five characters all with separate plights, and fought some of the most towering bosses in the history of 2 or 3D. But it gets better... Just before press time we recieved word that Atlus would be incorporating dual voice tracks. As it stands the English is first rate, but the Japanese is simply amazing, so this is truly a dream localization. Odin Sphere is on course to become one of the greatest action-RPGs of all time.

gwendolyn

...Daughter of the Demon Lord Odin and princess of the Kingdom of Ragnanival.

Field of prey

The action in Odin Sphere can only be described as natural. Don't look for any button prompts or evolving combo trees; this game is smarter than that…much, much smarter. The main characters' move sets are unmitigated simplicity. On the ground Gwendolyn attacks forward and upwards and blocks or she can take to the air for a hovering attack, or float about the ceiling barreling down like a torpedo onto the prey below. The feel—a level of contact that only 2D can muster—is spectacular and like all the best side scrollers the patterns will put your reactions to the test. Blocking is key, as is memorizing the attack patterns of enemies that change with each passing area. As wonderful as the action is, however, Odin Sphere is equal parts RPG, and so it represents but a trickle in a stream of tactics. You must also become horticulturist, alchemist and gourmand if you hope to survive. Seeds and roots, potions and protein are key to your quest. Each area in the land of Erion consists of a constellation of rings—circular levels you must clear that are filled with waves of indigenous creatures linked together by shops and mid bosses, leading to a final confrontation. Depending on how well you perform in a given level, the chest that drops will bear an equivalent amount of items such as various seeds, material potties, coins, and ingredients. You can also unearth indigenous herbs and roots by jumping on areas where you hear a faint squeak underfoot, sending the root below scampering away for you to swipe and put in your bag… There are traditional shops—buy lots of bags—selling your basic ingredients and restoration items such as milk and cheese, but to master the game you must master the items you forage.

> "…this game raises the bar considerably. I've seen many a beautiful game in my life, but few as exalted as this."

Fun with Phozons

Let's begin with the Baromett Seed as an example of battlefield tactics. Let's say that it's all you can do to survive the first wave in a given level with the food you've been able to purchase and store. Each monster you kill releases Phozons into the air. These can either be absorbed into your characters weapon to gradually level it up or used to grow various types of plants. The Baromett Seed takes 12 Phozons to mature. You can either kill a wave of monsters to gradually grow it (once planted) or, if you've got a Rosemile Seed, simply plant them side by side as these handy seeds gradually yield 12 Phozons. The Baromett shrub that grows will produce two lovely little sheep which you must chase down and kill, producing two scrumptious lamb chops. Other seeds produce various forms of healing fruit, and even more seeds. Next we have potions and indigenous herbs and roots. Along the way you will find recipes, some of which can be mixed on the battle field and some which must be taken to a restaurant and prepared for you as you dine. Take the Habanero: These little peppers can be found in icy regions and once added to material produce a warming potion to protect you from the elements. Enough money buys a warming charm—each character can equip bought and found charms and bangles one at a time as needed—but these are pricey. Early on it's better to focus on staying alive. I've only touched on what is an immense healing and alchemy system. By game's end—a good 50-60 hours depending on how frequently you replay levels to obtain more bags and precious items—you'll be master of the art of survival in the lands of Erion. Each character also amasses a selection of life-saving special moves. Absorbing Phozons fills a gauge which grants subsequently stronger powers as the adventure wears on and your weapon becomes more powerful. As you can see, to a great extent Odin Sphere is what you personally make of it. There's more than one way to skin a dragon.

A Visual Feast

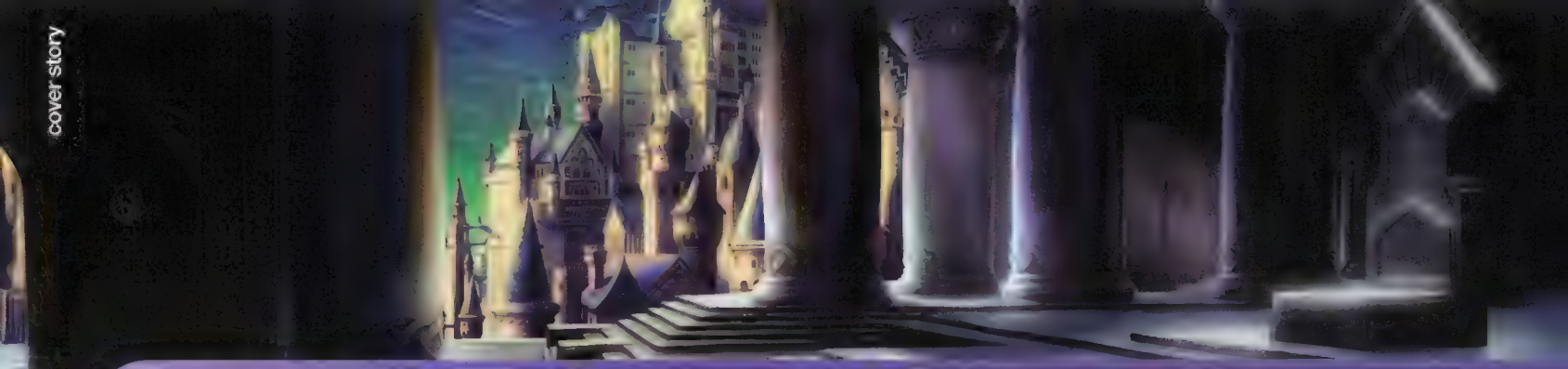
I don't care how great the game or deep the systems, if it's unattractive then why bother. Video games are first and foremost a visual medium. Graphics are the front door to every game along with the look and feel of the lead character. Miss on either count and you might as well have stayed home. The elegant multi-layered animated backgrounds in Odin Sphere are complimented by gloriously animated characters and seraphic lighting the likes of which 2D has never seen, and the players—every last Fairy, Elf, Dragon, Valkyrie, and fairytale creature—represent the highest echelon of Japanese character design. Vanillaware have proven once again that there is simply no substitute for this level of hand drawn artistry. As beautiful as the best of 32- and 64-bit 2D was, Odin Sphere raises the bar considerably. I've seen many a beautiful game in my life, but few as exalted as this. I love 3D on the occasion it's molded correctly (FF XII, Primal, Maximo, Okami, Jak and Daxter, JSRF, God of War, Devil May Cry, and Gears of War spring to mind) but the point is that the list is long. Not so for 2D, even though hand-drawn art of this caliber, as rare as it may be, can achieve a level of beauty that polygons cannot muster. Why they cannot coexist is the question that has plagued me since I waved goodbye after my glorious Symphony of the Night, Astal, Mischief Makers, and Guardian Heroes. I've waited 12 years for this game to emerge: A 2D adventure strong enough to resuscitate an area of gaming long dead, that if resurrected would forever change this wonderful pastime. And that's where you come in. I love my games—games in which others often find fault. Is it because I suffered through the dark days of 8- and 16-bit where one game in every dozen was worth playing? Perhaps. But more likely it's something deep inside me that I can't explain after living and breathing this industry for 17 years. All I can do is speak from the heart. In the case of Odin Sphere, however, I am confident that this is a perfect game, and that anyone who comes to it will derive the same. Seldom if ever has such an amalgam of beauty, art, sound—the music will bring you to your knees—and gameplay merged together to form such a magical whole. To the victor the spoils… and that victor, is you.

Odin Sphere score **10**

Odin Sphere has it all: Great story, characters, action, role-playing, length, design, innovation, and a stunning dual language localization.

System(s)	PS2
Developer	Vanillaware, Ltd.
Publisher	Atlus
Online/Multi	NA
ESRB Rating	Teen
Available	May 29

A Conversation With George Kamitani & Hiroyuki Tanaka >>



interview

A Conversation With George Kamitani & Hiroyuki Tanaka

by Dai Kohama and Nick Des Barres
Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: Mr. Kamitani, you exploded onto the video game scene in 1997 with Princess Crown, but we haven't heard anything from you since then. May we ask what you've been doing for ten years?

George Kamitani: Well...I'm not sure what I can and can't say (laughs). Princess Crown was my first experience with directing a game. I didn't really know anything about making games back then, but through trial and error we eventually finished the project. Unfortunately, Princess Crown ended up not selling very well, and I didn't get the chance to make another game. It's not that I didn't want to–I thought it would have been very interesting to evolve the technology we were using in Princess Crown for the next generation. Back then it was *really* all about 3-D, and our 2-D game was considered a failure. No matter where we took our ideas, we were turned down. If I had had the chance back then to do another game, believe me, I would have (laughs). With Odin Sphere, I was finally able to go independent and found my own company, and it turned out our supervisor at Atlus was a big fan of Princess Crown. He basically came to me and said, "Come on, let's make a game similar to Princess Crown!"

Hiroyuki Tanaka: I think the ten-year gap actually helped this game get made. If it had been right after Princess Crown, we definitely would have been told no (laughs).

GK: Yeah, the timing was really good. We were able to start development on Odin Sphere with a sort of "why not?" attitude, and luckily we were sitting on a lot of assets we'd been working on, on and off, over the years. But for me, the Princess Crown series begins and ends with 1. I didn't want to make another game called Princess Crown.
I was first invited to do a project in April of 2002, but I was working on another project for a different company at the time. Unfortunately, that project ran into trouble, kept getting delayed and delayed... Whenever Atlus asked if I was ready, all I could say was, "I'm totally dead right now." When my contract for that project finally ran out, I was able to start my company in Kansai and begin working on Odin Sphere. That was September of 2004.

HT: I remember we started development with five people.

GK: I'm originally from the Kansai area, and I really wanted to incorporate my company here. Luckily, Atlus was very open to the idea, and I invited a few friends I'd worked with on previous projects to join me at Vanillaware. Those were the first five, including myself. I quickly realized we didn't have enough people, and we started recruiting staff. At this point I thought we'd have the game done by spring of 2006, but...things didn't work out that way (laughs). I was not only drawing all of the original art myself, but writing the story as well. I started writing in July and thought I'd be done in August, but before I knew it, it was February of the next year. My user comment in MSN Messenger during this period was: "It's still summer for me!" (laughs). I'd never written a script by myself before, so I had trouble gauging what was too much, and what might not be enough. It got worse when I took my plot and started dividing it into actual cutscenes. I thought the process would take three months, but it ended up taking six. We have about 160 cutscenes that average two to three minutes each–a total of five and a half hours of dialogue.

HT: The original plan didn't call for nearly this much content. We thought we'd make Odin Sphere a serial game, with individual chapters released separately. Midway through we decided to finish everything and put it in one product.

How many staff members did you build up to in the end?
GK: We did almost all of the game with 12 people here at Vanillaware, and added two more people towards the end of development. So, 14 total. The music and sound was handled by famous game composer Hitoshi Sakimoto's company, Basiscape.

You've said Odin Sphere *isn't* Princess Crown 2, but rather something totally different. Are there any connections between the two works at all? The characters of Gladriel, from Princess Crown, and Gwendolyn, from Odin Sphere, seem very similar.
GK: A few of the monsters are from Princess Crown, but they've been re-colored and re-animated. That's about it. There are no storyline connections.

Speaking of monsters, we're huge fans of your artwork. All the characters and monsters in Odin Sphere bear your unmistakable touch...you don't draw *all* the sprites by yourself, do you?
GK: Not this time (laughs). Thank you for your kind words. I'm looking forward to seeing your cover.

And we're looking forward to printing your art on our cover. As an illustrator, what inspires and influences you?
GK: I love vintage illustration of the 19th century. In particular, I'm influenced by an artist named John Tenniel, who drew the original illustrations for Alice in Wonderland. His understanding of animal forms, in particular, was just astonishing. I really find myself influenced by the overall *weltanschauung* of his work. That's really what I aspire to. But there are so many wonderful illustrators the world over, I couldn't begin to list them all (laughs).

After playing Odin Sphere for a little while, I was surprised to find it had much

"Even if players aren't great action gamers, they can think strategically and use items to proceed."
~George Kamitani

...The prince of the Kingdom of Titania, transformed into a beast.

Gwendolyn's most effective boss fighting tactic is her aerial assault.

cornelius

less emphasis on action than I expected. Just looking at screenshots, I thought it would be almost like a beat-'em-up.
GK: Yes, while making Princess Crown and designing all the items that appear in that game, I thought it would be interesting to use them much more technically, almost like a card game. Even if players aren't great action gamers, they can think strategically and use items to proceed. When I was at Capcom I worked on games that were extremely action-heavy and I wanted to get away from that.

HT: Now that you mention it, you started out in this industry at Capcom, didn't you?

GK: That's right, as a game designer. This was back in the era of Street Fighter II': Championship Edition and Saturday Night Slam Masters.

I had no idea you worked on those games. They're pretty dear to my heart as a video game fan.
GK: The problem with those games was they became too difficult. It got to the point where we were putting in ridiculous moves like double 360s with multiple button presses. From my experience on those games I felt that going forward with that

kind of design would just make the barrier too high for people. So I wanted to do something different.

HT: And then you left Capcom. You got a lot of attention for your art, but you were originally a game designer, weren't you?

GK: I was. I actually started out learning just how to code in high school at a game company in Hiroshima called Crossbit. It was right in the middle of the Famicom boom, and I got experience both in graphics and programming for MSX.

I didn't know you were so multitalented!
GK: I just really wanted to make games. After Crossbit, I went to Capcom with the intention of learning as much as I could and quitting in three years. I felt locked here, though (laughs). One of my colleagues had started another game company and invited me to join. They were making home console software, and after hearing out with their initial project I wanted to do something completely original. That became Princess Crown.

HT: Did you still end up doing

GK: Yeah, we went to Sega first. At that time the game was heavily influenced by Gainax's Princess Maker. It was sort of a combination of Princess Maker and my work at Capcom on fighting games. The Saturn was starting to lose its battle against the PlayStation, and Sega was trying to fight back with RPGs. The first time we presented Princess Crown to them, they asked, "Is this an RPG?", and I blurted out, "Yes! It sure is!" (laughs).

HT: Hey, you'd do anything to get your game made, right (laughs)?

GK: Riding on the bullet train on the way home with my programmer, I was like, "What have I done! Now we have no choice but to make an RPG out of this!" And that's how Princess Crown became the game it is. Eventually, Sega introduced us to a third-party they were tight with, and that turned out to be Atlus. At the time Sega and Atlus were working very closely on their Print Club machines in arcades, and as you know abbreviations are very, very important in Japanese culture. Both Princess Crown and Print Club would be abbreviated "PuriKura," so everyone was joking that Sega had brought PuriKura to a company that already had PuriKura (laughs). Whenever I was on the subway, I'd overhear high school girls talking about PuriKura and it always made my heart skip a beat. Of course, it was Print Club (laughs).
HT: Atlus even had another PuriKura, Princess Clara from the Power Instinct series. We thought we should come up with another name because of the overlap, but Kamitani had very strong feelings about the title, so it stayed.

Getting back to Odin Sphere, it's obvious long-time video game fans will respond to this game. Do you also hope it might show gamers who grew up with 3-D how wonderful a hand-drawn game can be?
GK: My intentions aren't that grand or lofty (laughs). I guess you could say I just made want I wanted to make. A Kamitani-style take on Norse mythology, if you will.

HT: I think I speak for Atlus when I say we don't want people to get too hung up on "2-D" or "3-D" when they look at this game. We just hope people will have the opportunity to see it in motion. Forgive me for saying this, since you're a print magazine, but still shots of Odin Sphere simply don't convey how beautiful the game is. It's all moving. *Everything* moves.

It really is stunning. I hope our readers will get on the internet immediately after reading this and check out some movies, because stills just do not do the game justice.
HT: The concept was to do the best 2-D the PlayStation 2 was capable of. They may not look it, but even the backgrounds are 2-D.

GK: They seem to have depth like polygons, but they're really all hand-crafted.

HT: It's an application of many, many 2-D layers and multiple scrolls. Nothing is ever static. Wherever you look there's motion. We'll be putting up a lot of movies from the game on the official American website, so please do take a look. We'd like fans to at least be able to see each of the five main characters in motion before the game's release in May. We want them to say, "This animation is incredible!"

GK: Towards the end of production we didn't know whether we were making a video game, or an animated movie (laughs).

mercedes

...The princess of the fairy Kingdom of Ringford

I'm curious about the tech behind it. Everything on screen really does seem to be moving.
GK: Everything is originally a hand-drawn, still image. They're then cut up into individual parts, which are all animated separately.

HT: It's all crafted by hand, so every scene, every screen of the game should look great.

Everything seems so sharp. It's like the world of Odin Sphere exists independent of the PlayStation 2's 480i resolution.
GK: That's because all the art is originally painted at a much higher resolution. We could even take it directly into HD resolution. When downconverted for PS2 it becomes much smaller.

Do you think this style of production could be a viable alternative to megabudget high-definition 3-D games for the next generation of hardware?
GK: Well...if it's not 3-D your idea usually doesn't get approved. In the case of this game, we were fortunate enough to have Atlus let us basically do whatever we wanted.

Perhaps the singularly most impressive thing about Odin Sphere is its production design. Games today seem to be obsessed with cinematic presentation, whereas your game is almost willfully theatrical.
GK: Yes, it's kind of like a puppet show. I realized something while making Princess Crown, and that was the fact that cinematic presentation is impossible when your "camera" can only move left and right. Obviously things like tight closeups of the characters are impossible; instead of conveying emotion with subtle changes of expression, you have to be broad and theatrical, like a play. The story is also very theatrical, so I think it lends itself to that style. Limiting the action to one plane also allowed us to really concentrate on building up the quality of the art into something overwhelming.

Princess Crown used a lot of innovative tricks like segmented sprites and 2-D morphing to achieve smooth animation on very large characters. Is Odin Sphere an evolution of those techniques?
GK: Yes, it is. We also have 3-D experience now, so we were able to create a set of great new tools that drew from that knowledge base.

How much work *is* it, drawing all these sprites by hand?
GK: Our tools actually allow us to draw surprisingly fast. We have a total of about 70 individual characters, but if all we had to draw were action motions we could have had a lot more. What really takes time is the animation for cutscenes. With five and a half hours of story, there's tons of things we have to draw–characters holding hands, blushing, hugging, whatever–all animations you'll only see once (laughs).

That must take real dedication!
GK: You'd be surprised how into it our artists get. I couldn't stop them (laughs). I knew the stuff they were turning out was fantastic so I prepared myself for the consequences and just let them run with it (laughs).

HT: You knew you wanted to do something with this much animation, so before anything else you worked on getting a solid toolset in place, right?

GK: That's right. Surprisingly, on this project I really didn't animate anything myself. I wanted to, but the only thing I personally handled was Gwendolyn's running animation. Honestly, this type of animation was new for most of the staff. Initially my goals were set a little lower, but everyone completely exceeded my expectations. I mean totally. They were going absolutely crazy (laughs). Getting them to know when to call it a day was the hardest part.

Beautiful visuals are always buoyed by beautiful music, and you've got one of the very best video game composers, Hitoshi Sakimoto of Ogre series and Final Fantasy XII fame, working on Odin Sphere. How did that come about?
GK: That's actually a very long and dark story (laughs). I originally met him on the last project I was involved with–the whole situation was in shambles. It was awful. I mean, Mr. Sakimoto is a really famous guy in this industry, right? He's worked on so many masterpieces. I was really excited to have the chance to work with him, but our producer went to Sakimoto with an incredibly low offer. It was just embarrassing. I was sure he'd basically phone the composition in, but he worked really hard and delivered a wonderful score. This really impressed me. Here was a guy who was a true creator. I knew then and there that I wanted to work with him again, under more sane conditions. I heard later he saw the terrible condition we were in on that project and thought, "I'll do whatever I can do to save these people" (laughs). We sort of became drinking buddies. He had just started his company, Basiscape, and I was hoping to start Vanillaware, so we would often talk about our dreams as company presidents. I didn't see him for a while after that project ended, and when we came to him with the Odin Sphere presentation hoping he would do the music, he said, "Kamitani, I've been worrying about you! Where did you go!". Anyway, he accepted immediately and it's been a pleasure working with him.

Is the music for Odin Sphere internal PlayStation 2 synth, or a live recording?

"Riding on the bullet train on the way home with my programmer, I was like, 'What have I done! Now we have no choice but to make an RPG out of this!'" ~ **George Kamitani**

In testing phase.

You were speaking earlier about how you wanted to make a more strategic battle mechanic, and in Japan Odin Sphere is being marketed as a straight RPG. Tell me how you arrived at this game design.

[redacted] I had a problem I had with Princess Crown that I never got around. Was it an RPG, or was it an action game? While developing it with the next programmer I assigned, you wanted to put weapons up and it went pretty quickly. There just isn't an RPG in you unless you include hack-and-slash elements. I wanted to start with the premise that I wanted to do a 2D RPG. Before starting work on Odin Sphere, I had a very strong idea of what I wanted to do. I wanted to follow in the footsteps of Princess Crown and I also wanted to make a game that was fun to play. I wanted to make a very good action game, and I'm sure to make Odin Sphere.

How does the character growth system work?

[redacted] The core of the game is combining with the "Valkyrie Profile" [the weapon] to make a game, so every one belonging to a character levels more and more as he or she fights. So with a party of three characters, instead of a game that requires developing, leveling and teach character really, what a user can do is focus on just one character and develop them. Knowing which one of the characters you want to develop is key, which is why at the end of the episodes I don't show you how much experience you get. I want you to play with your party, so even if you're not the one fighting, you're still getting experience points and being developed.

You've mentioned that you're a big fan of Princess Crown. Are there any elements from that game that you've brought over to Odin Sphere?

[redacted] Princess Crown was a game that I made when I was very young, and I wanted to make a game that was fun to play. I wanted to make a very good action game, and I'm sure to make Odin Sphere.

How does the character growth system work?

[redacted] The core of the game is combining with the "Valkyrie Profile" [the weapon] to make a game, so every one belonging to a character levels more and more as he or she fights. So with a party of three characters, instead of a game that requires developing, leveling and teach character really, what a user can do is focus on just one character and develop them. Knowing which one of the characters you want to develop is key, which is why at the end of the episodes I don't show you how much experience you get. I want you to play with your party, so even if you're not the one fighting, you're still getting experience points and being developed.

You might call it a thinking man's beat 'em-up.

[redacted] Unfortunately the system is a little difficult to understand without actually playing it. I think even if a translation produced at Atlus, Mr. Nakamoto, only really got it just the other day. [laughs]

HT: Hmmm, not laughed! Speaking of items, RPG players tend to hoard them, but in Odin Sphere please do use them whenever you want. I think the game will be a lot more fun that way.

[redacted]: That's true. One of the reasons I think we joked with Princess Crown was the fact that people at the end of the game hoarded so many countless hours of items they never used. I figured in the beginning of it to short them anyway, why not give them a reason to do so?

You mean like seeds and Phozon.

[redacted]: Yes. Be cracking seeds you can absorb Phozon and more healing items, or you could use the seeds and get something totally different. We have it up to the player. It's fairly complicated system and there's a lot to learn. It was really good at trying to explain it to Atlus during the planning phase.

How long do you expect Odin Sphere to take the average player to finish?

[redacted] I would say around fifty hours.

HT: If you're really good at the game. It might be a little less than that.

[redacted]: I'm not very confident about that.

HT: Once you get used to the menu system and learn how to use items effectively, you should be able to proceed without having to level up. However, the game is built so that you can finish it through leveling up alone. That kind of play should naturally take longer.

[redacted]: The first version of this game took about a whopping twenty to fourteen hours, and we got it down to a point that it is easier. I don't think it took fourteen hours of the

A full version of Oswald is under construction by Vanillaware.

"Speaking of items, RPG players tend to hoard them, but in Odin Sphere please do use them whenever you want"

– Hiroyuki Tanaka

...The surviving princess of the Kingdom of Valentine

velvet

...ray the story a bit and introduce...

HT: After finishing the story with the...ceress, another more powerful enemy...ne had to battle. It's very Princess Crown-esque.

GK: It's totally Princess Crown Sequel. That was something I wanted to keep for fans of the first game. I didn't want to disappoint anyone.

Did you have to cut anything to reduce the playtime down from seventy hours?

GK: One thing that wasn't very popular was a summon system we had. Each character in the game got different saved up moves, which I thought was interesting, but someone else thought it was tedious designing. So we got rid of it.

I was really surprised to find out that Odin Sphere is coming out in both Japan and America almost simultaneously. Was it a difficult localization?

HT: We use less of the text in this game. It displayed in word balloons, like a comic book? They don't automatically scale to the size of the text. Every single one has to be sized by hand. We've never able to use the same word balloon between Japanese and English—they always get longer in English.

With games that just have text changed in a window they don't present, but for this one it was difficult. The reason we were able to hold this game home and simultaneously is because the Japanese version of Odin Sphere had already been completed for quite a while. We had plenty of time with the English version, but it was honestly the most difficult localization I've ever worked on [laughs].

GK: As we launch it to put in the English voices, it's possibly done.

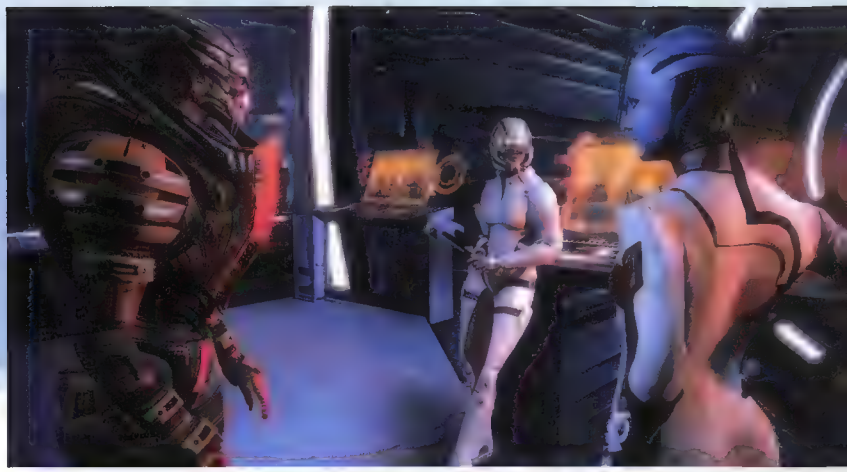
HT: By the way, we know there's a lot of American fans that prefer the original Japanese voice actors, so you'll be able to switch between the two.

We'll let you get back to finishing the English version of Odin Sphere, but do you have any final comments for your American fans?

GK: This game was made with thirty year's worth of blood, sweat and tears, so I really people will check it out, and just get lost in its world for a while.

HT: We'll be releasing the Amalgam Odin Sphere website regularly with reviews and other goodies, so please come take a look at it!

Mass Effect



Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka, former doctors and now the heads of game company BioWare, sit in a hotel room somewhere in San Francisco. They're there as part of the week-long Game Developers Conference, and are using one of the five days solely to show off their new Xbox 360 role-playing game Mass Effect.

And they've just seemingly witnessed a Mass Effect in action. During one of their game previews, something rather terrible happens. A game writer walks in, not having bathed in, roughly, forever. He sits down, and the room quickly fills with a virulent funk. Cause: body odor. Mass Effect: an exodus.

Now a mid-afternoon preview session has been delayed; a hotel employee carrying cleaning materials has been called in to repair the damage. He is visibly shaken when he exits after some minutes, but proclaims the room clean and deodorized. The previews resume, and Mass Effect gets it day in the sun.

With that, the extended lesson has been learned. One human can really influence the course of events, whether it be stinky journalist guy or Zeschuk and Muzyka's potentially galaxy-saving protagonist Commander Shephard.

Shephard, who can be either male or female, becomes immersed in a galaxy-wide mystery involving the return of a race of killer cybernetic beings. As humans are relative newcomers to the galactic scene, Shephard's actions will color the way the game's alien species see and treat humans. BioWare is giving players the power to shape the galaxy by the choices they make. Shephard can emerge as a saintly hero, an out-of-control maniac, or somewhere in between. The game's story, an adventure playing out over the course of the Xbox 360's lifetime, with at least three stand-alone game titles supplemented by downloadable content, will be impacted on accordingly.

For Mass Effect, BioWare has created a new dialogue system, one where characters can converse as they would in real life. It seems almost patently ridiculous to say the conversation in this epic, space-themed game is as intriguing as Effect's near-photorealistic graphics, or its wide-reaching scope, or even the freedom it presents to players, but it's also very much true.

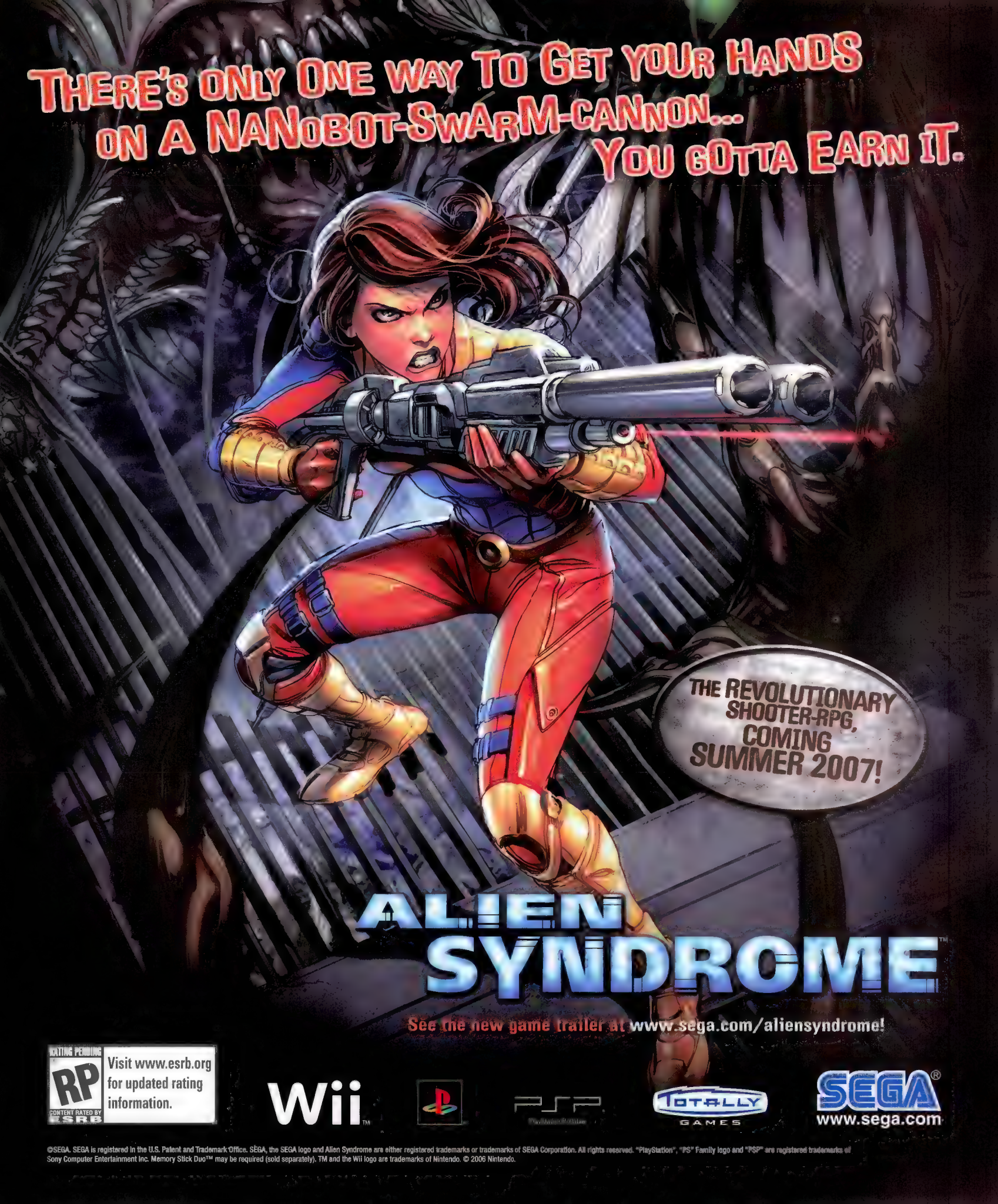
Previous role-playing games were wholly reactive, with one character speaking and then a very real pause while the player selected a response. With Effect, conversations become almost interactive. Players can choose what Shephard says while another character is speaking, and the result is a reduction—or perhaps even an elimination—of the awkward pause between statement and reply. In this way, Shephard can angrily bark right back at a haughty alien, or simply issue a sharp and forceful punch to the jaw to ensure the silence of an incoherently rambling human.

"BioWare is giving players the power to shape the galaxy by the choices they make."

What's shown today is perhaps 30 minutes of play, with the introduction of Shephard, a quick tour of the spaceship Normandy (which the character can use to travel across the galaxy), and a hint of both combat and the game's plot. Cybernetic beings impale humans on long spikes; later, there will be space zombies, which Muzyka remarks are "twice as cool" as regular ones. No lie.

When it comes time to haul out the guns for some squad-based combat, Muzyka notes the player's two artificial intelligence-controlled allies are smart enough to operate without direction. Players can also issue specific commands to the squad by selecting waypoints, or even directly choose an ally's actions. Cover, at all times, is a good thing, and special powers, called biotics, will be able to tip a battle in the player's favor. After all, one person really can make a difference.

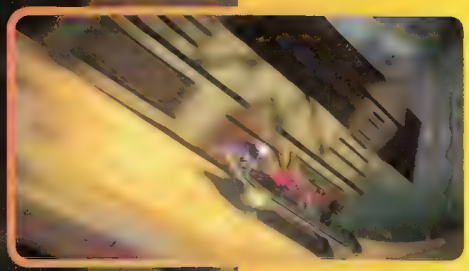
Mass Effect	
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	BioWare
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	June



©SEGA. SEGA is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. SEGA, the SEGA logo and Alien Syndrome are either registered trademarks or trademarks of SEGA Corporation. All rights reserved. "PlayStation", "PS" Family logo and "PSP" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Memory Stick Duo™ may be required (sold separately). TM and the Wii logo are trademarks of Nintendo. © 2006 Nintendo.

Little Big Planet

Triumph for the small developer



Say hello to Sack Boy.

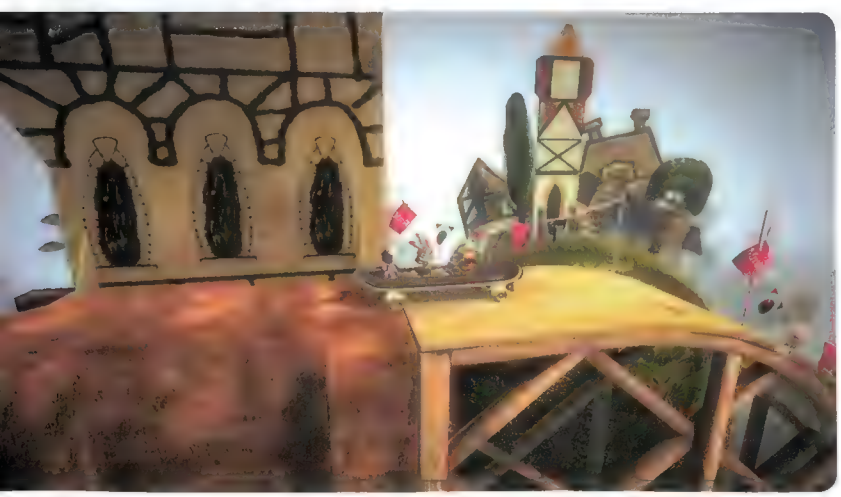
words Greg Orlando

If such a thing is possible, LittleBigPlanet stole the show at the Game Developers Conference. The week-long event, held this year in San Francisco, traditionally focuses on seminars of game development and exhibitions of technology. Developers and publishers had shied away from using the conference to showcase games, but this year things changed in a big way. With the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in flux, Sony decided to use the conference as a pulpit from which to preach the gospel of gaming…

Planet seems a triumph for the small developer. It's a game about making games done by the people who created the eminently quirky PC title Rag Doll Kung Fu.

Players control a little cloth person, called a Sack Boy. The Sack Boy is both a means by which a game can be created, and a character in the game itself. As with the many things inside Planet, these creatures are wholly customizable. When Sony debuted Planet, one of the little creatures was dressed as daredevil Evel Knievel (complete with the stuntman's trademark red, white, and blue crash helmet and jumpsuit), another—a Sack Girl—had pink hair and a feathered headband, a third wore an animal headdress with a long colorful piece of fabric that trailed off the end of it, and the fourth went nude, displaying the zipper all the Sack Boys have running up their bellies.

Players can control the individual parts of the Sack Boys' bodies. The analog sticks on the PlayStation 3's Sixaxis controller can be used to move their limbs around; a forceful push of the analog stick will swing a Sack Boy's arm so he can smack a nearby comrade. Tilting the motion sensor moves the Boy's head. It remains to be seen how the game allows for character movement and limb control, but it's likely a controller button lets players swap between the two options.



Items can be called up, shrunk, expanded, pasted over, colored, dropped, and arranged in both the fore- and backgrounds to create a game and decorate a world. During the initial demonstration for Planet, one character dropped down a poster of a cartoon king, and a second one pasted stickers of eyes on it, then went to work pasting goofy oversized teeth on its mouth. The Sack Boys use a thought bubble interface to put objects in the game world, and the developers have stated that it's so easy as to allow anyone to immediately jump in and create a level.

User-created levels can be uploaded and shared. More importantly, they can be played. Here, Planet shines as a simple physics-based 2D platformer. Sack Boys jump and grab on to a giant cog labeled The Wheel of Terror, with the word "terror" crossed out and replaced by the word "fun." Once on the wheel, they hold on for dear life as the wheel spins them around and around. They work cooperatively to solve puzzles, picking up a rocket-powered jetpack and then flying down to pick up a giant shell, one that must be lifted by four characters. Once the shell is grabbed by the quartet, they fly it up and drop it on a lever to depress it which, in turn, lifts a gate. And then, for the absolutely cool finale, the four Sack Boys grab onto a huge skateboard and roll it down to the level's conclusion. It's brilliant, brilliant stuff and can't be released soon enough.

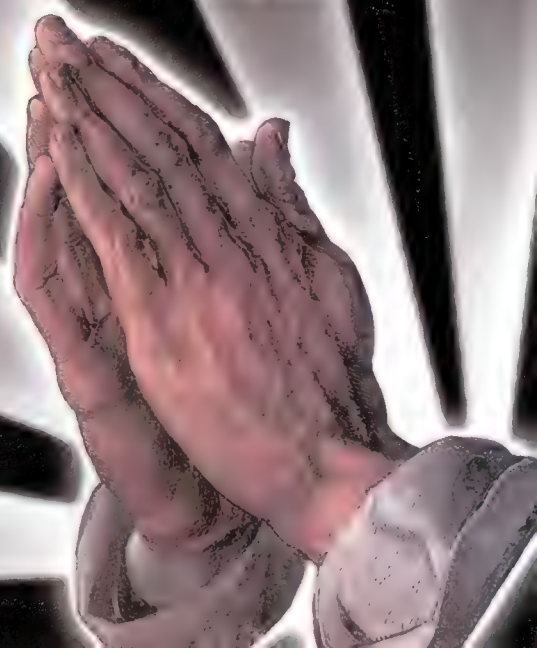
Little Big Planet	preview
System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Media Molecule
Publisher	Sony
Available	2008

Do your Walls Inspire you?

Andrew Brandou
"As A Man Thinketh, So He Is"
Original Paintings on view thru May 5th

Chris Anthony
The Parker Photo Series
Limited Edition Prints

Eric Joyner
"Forbidden Adventures" Exhibit
Original Oils on Wood



Corey Helford Gallery
8522 Washington Blvd
Culver City, CA 90232
310.287.2340

All Works Available online at
www.coreyhelfordgallery.com

Shadowrun

Like Dungeons and Dragons, only with more blood spray...

words Greg Orlando

In the not-too-distant future, combat will take place as it was perhaps always meant to be: with chaingun-toting trolls blasting dwarves in the face with hot lead, and lots of gratuitous blood sprays to commemorate the occasion.

Waiting, of course, is for suckers. That gory future is here now, brought to life in the form of Shadowrun, a multiplayer-only first-person shooter for Xbox 360 and PCs.

Born from the pen-and-paper game of the same name, Shadowrun has been the cause of much consternation among the fans of the venerable series. The Shadowrun franchise is holy ground for many, many people—people with Internet connections and both the inclination and desire to voice their opinions on the perceived trampling of the license.

Microsoft, for its part, is quick to note Shadowrun is very true to its roots. During a preview of the game at March's Game Developers Conference, a Microsoft representative says the company arranged for some of Shadowrun's most vocal critics to see how faithful the translation was. After playing the game, the representative says, "We didn't win them over entirely. But we probably did shut a lot of them up."

Never mind the critics; Shadowrun is playing. Two people are playing, one on a PC with a mouse and keyboard, and the other using an Xbox 360 and its controller. A host of A.I-controlled bots provides ample cannon fodder. In the game, an elf raises his hand and a quick screen flash indicates he's teleported through the ceiling to the level above. Nearby, a troll is taking fire, and whitish spikes are forming on its skin. Trolls armor up when taking damage. Their skin hardens and they take less damage.

Two huge beasts, one seemingly ablaze and the other an icy blue, are fighting one another. They're summoned minions, and its Shadowrun law that there are no friends among them. They'll brawl with another minion even if their masters are on the same team. When the combat moves outside, to what looks like the world's most depressing (and oddly futuristic) shantytown, a fat dwarf jumps off a tall building and sprouts mechanical wings that help him glide through the air.

Shadowrun blends magic and gunfire in a most delightful way. Characters can resurrect fallen comrades, summon huge minions to defend themselves, turn into smoke to avoid attacks, teleport, and call forth a tree of life to heal their wounds. They can also opt a more scientific approach to their killing by employing technology to counter magic, increase their accuracy with guns, glide, and even see through walls. Or they can choose to merge both technology and magic together.

Players can choose to fight as one of four different races: elves, dwarves, humans, and trolls, and the game's decided lack of continuity means it will be easy to try out lots of new combinations. Characters can't be carried over from one series of matches to another (although they can be improved during a competition), so players won't be married to a particular style of play. They will, however, be married to the idea of the fantasy-based killing that Shadowrun, in its wisdom, will certainly provide.

"Microsoft, for its part, is quick to note Shadowrun is very true to its roots."

Shadowrun	
System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	FASA Interactive
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	June

The brightest light casts the darkest shadow

Aedis Eclipse

Generation Of Chaos™

Massive Military Encounters

An immersive 30 vs. 30 real-time combat system!

Extensive Army Customization

Customize your units, formation, battle style, equipment, and more!

3 stories in 1

Each world has its own unique, compelling storyline!

NOW ON SALE !!

www.nisamerica.com/games/aediseclipse

EVERYONE 10+
Fantasy Violence
Language
Use of Alcohol
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation Portable

NIS America

IDEA FACTORY

©2007 IDEA FACTORY. All rights reserved. Licensed to and Published by NIS America, Inc. Distributed exclusively by KOEI Corporation. Generation Of Chaos is a trademark of IDEA FACTORY. "PlayStation", "PS" Family logo and "PSP" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Memory Stick Duo™ may be required (sold separately). The ratings icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.

Crash of the Titans

It's jackin' time...

words Brady Fiechter

Crash Bandicoot stars in his own fighting game? Well, not quite, but in Crash of the Titans, the dominant platforming you've come to expect from a Crash adventure is being crafted more to break up the pace and inject some added flavor into the heavy stretches of combat. You'll be swinging on ropes, bouncing off objects and climbing through the 20 different areas all proper platform-like, but the thrust of the game generates from hand-to-hand battles with the copious denizens of Crash's island.

"We have some big Street Fighter fans here," says lead designer Joe McGinn. The brawls aren't necessarily being designed to tax you like that classic one-on-one fighting game, but the inspiration is definitely there. "You know how Street Fighter has that sort of rock, paper, scissors mentality? Every creature here builds off that. Every creature has a light attack, a heavy attack, and a defensive move. Break through the block, throw a light to interrupt a heavy... that sort of thing."

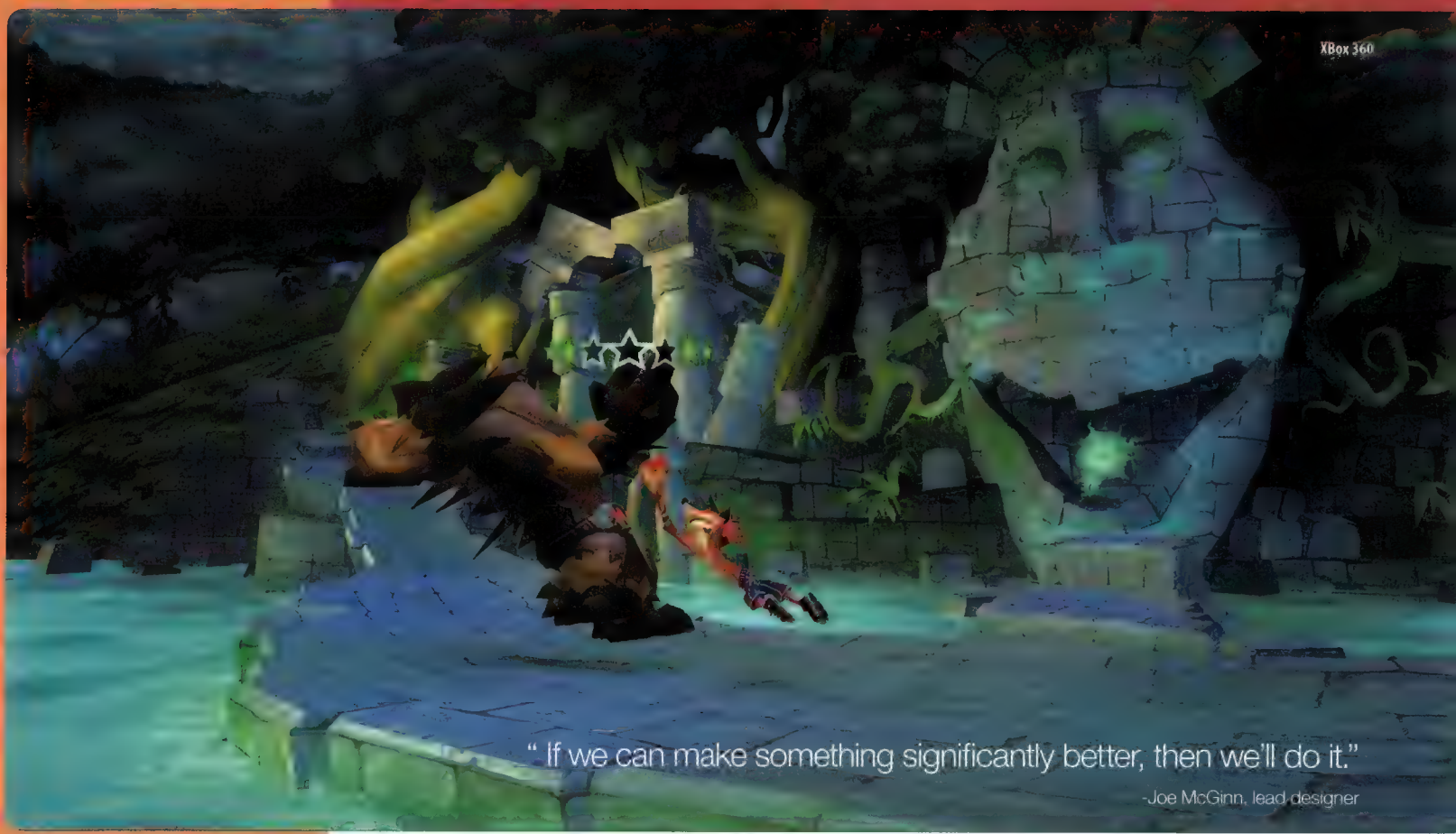
Crash essentially dips into the same move set he'll face from the enemy. "Anything they can do to you, you can do to them," says McGinn. And with the game's central hook, once you wear an enemy down, you can take control of them, pounding out your move set with the same method as before, only now you've got a different set of feet and hands dolling out the punishment. "Creatures go up in status and size, up to boss titans. It takes some work to get on them, then you get a reward to kick some butt on the monster."

Every enemy has a special attack, and with the Wii version of Crash of the Titans, these attacks get integrated into the motion control of the remote. With one ape-like behemoth, you pound your chest to command the creature to wail on the opposition. "We call them second-generation gestures, you take control of the enemies' arms," explains McGinn. "It's not just drawing a circle on the screen to get a result. You become the enemy, feel like you're controlling his arms... We really love the Wii. It's doing everything we wanted it to."

While Crash begins with a basic set of moves, he'll receive a number of upgrades at the end of every level, boosted by the amount of mojo you collect. Cleaning out the level yields a wide assortment of rewards. "We're inspired by the Xbox 360 achievement system, so we're implementing an achievement-like system on all skews," says McGinn. "We want to give a lot of incentive to go back and replay levels. You can even acquire the skins from the enemies, wearing them to go back and open up more areas. You actually get extra benefits for the level, with that skin you can get a one-time jack, or you can break objects you normally couldn't. You can run back through levels and access a few more rooms to maybe get the collectible you couldn't get the first time. There's really a lot to do if you want to dig in."

Crash of the Titans	
System(s)	Wii, PS2, Xbox 360, DS, GBA, PSP
Developer	Radical (console), Amaze (DS, GBA), Supervillain (PSP)
Publisher	Sierra
Available	October

"...the dominant platforming you've come to expect from a Crash adventure is being crafted more to break up the pace and inject some added flavor into the heavy stretches of combat."



interview

Talkin' Crash with Radical Ent.

What is the essence of this newest Crash?

McGinn: It's that irreverent humor. We're trying to restore that. I think it's been a little bit lost, his humor style has evolved away from where it started, being able to break the 4th wall, wink at the camera…

Yousuf Mapara, art director: And to me, he doesn't over-analyze things. He just acts based on how he feels. He's kind of like a dog, like a puppy. He might be mad one second, and then all the sudden he's totally happy and forgets. Crash won't plot, he just goes with the situation.

McGinn: Even when you look at his body animations, he's just throwing his body into it. No thought of consequences, his arms are swinging wildly. It just looks right for Crash.

Mapara: Another way of thinking about it, some characters, like Ninjas and that sort of stuff, they're really agile and they do cool stuff, it's fun to play. We thought about how we could get that kind of agility into Crash. But if you think about, like, a monkey, they don't think about making cool poses, but they're just as agile as a Ninja. They're trying to get from point A to point B, and they're doing all this crazy stuff on the way. With Crash, all his fighting and movement, he just throws himself into it, tumble around and whatnot, but he's not so precise.

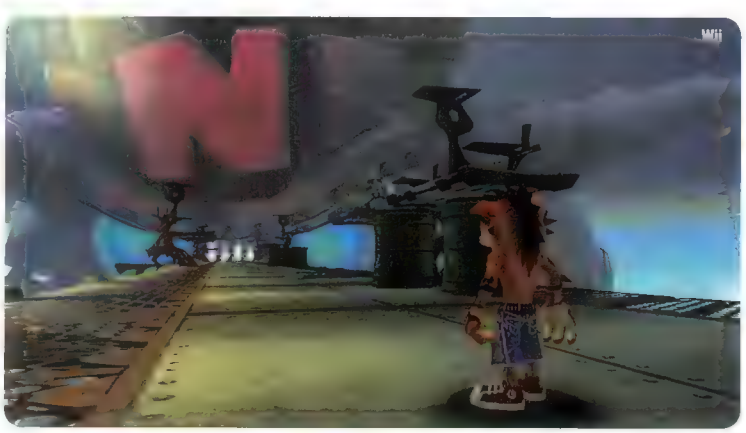
You mentioned that you couldn't, say, get away from the spin move completely, because it wouldn't be a Crash game. Whenever you take a license like this, how do you make a decision… you still have to make it feel like Crash, so how far do you go in the other direction? How far can you go into your own territory of design?

McGinn: That's a good question. That's something everyone has debated. It comes down to how much value we're adding by doing something better more than making a drastic change. If we can make something significantly better, then we'll do it. Like the currency system. The reason we invented mojo is because, well, jumping into crates and having apples come out of them is ok. It's good for its time. People liked it, it's a signature Crash thing. But it's not as much fun as currency that comes out and bounces on the floor and you can collect it. That's really satisfying, like in a Ratchet & Clank or a Mario, or whatever platformer has that. There's so much to be gained by that simple gameplay by changing the currency system of the game. So there's one little area we make the call.

Mapara: I think too, there's that essence to something, and there's just the details. You have to make the decision, is this change messing with the essence of it, or is it maybe just a detail that was there to suit the technology from PSOne?

McGinn: If it's good, then it's valuable. If it's good and players like it, don't change it just for the sake of change. Here it's about keeping that character, keeping his sense of humor. We're actually trying to restore that sense of humor more to what it originally was. He was kind of irreverent. You look at the old commercials where he made fun of Mario in that Crash suit. That's one thing people liked about Crash.

Mapara: He's not gone dark or anything. That's something we tried to avoid. The last thing you want to see is a character who's appealing because he's different, he's quirky, all the sudden he becomes all slick, carrying a gun. In this game, we wanted to give players a sense of power, and cool fighting and stuff, but still have that fun, quirky character. No matter how tough the monsters are, no matter how fierce and powerful their powers, Crash is always on top, having a good time.



There's a lot of dialogue, huh?

McGinn: Our full time writer likes to refer to "gags per square meter." Putting in all sorts of little gags. We're going to push the standards of variety in dialogue in games like this. He was also the main writer on Hit & Run, he wrote a lot of the one liners and gags. There's something like, 7, 8 thousand lines of dialogue in the game overall. For this kind of game, that's huge. When you're fighting, you're constantly hearing new stuff. When you use a big power, they'll get scared and run away and say something. Kind of like the little guys in Halo, it adds a lot of spice to the fights that way.

So this is certainly a change and direction for the series.

McGinn: It's about 70/30 in favor of combat. That was sort of where the hook came from

in the first place. We wanted to make a more interesting game with even more fun and depth. There's only so much you can do with the platforming. So the platforming here is more of the break and the rest between the combat areas. We want the combat arenas to be the destination, to have a good pacing, and you have fun getting there.

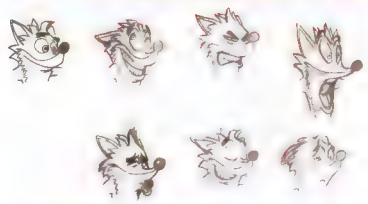
[McGinn asks Mapara to talk a bit about how they're approaching the art in the game.]

Mapara: We went kind of with a completely different art style than what Crash usually has. One of the things that really bothers me is when you can see in the game the limits of the technology. When you see blown out pixels that are trying to do too much. So we made a priority of, what techniques are blowing out the technology, are exposing those weaknesses. And we just stayed away from those. We built our art style around just… I guess pixels is one of the biggest things, a lot of games try to show too much detail. But you have such low resolution image maps that you can't do that. If you look at a lot of paintings, say an oil painting, when you paint, you don't draw every little detail. You know that crazy painter guy on TV with the big beard, Bob Ross... he just makes a bunch of splotches and he makes a whole forest. It's just a bunch of splotches, but it tricks your brain that it's a forest. We wanted to apply that same thinking, because in computer art, people are so fixated on making every single leaf, and every single detail, but with the technology, you just can't do that because of the low resolution images. So we took advantage of suggesting the detail and tricking your brain that it's a whole jungle. We used more broad-stroke colors and stuff. We looked at a lot of traditional art, even Disney they do that a lot in the backgrounds. It actually was a big challenge too, because we had no idea how to do that in 3D. So the first two months, it was like, don't worry about the game, just let the artists focus on building little sets and stuff where we can decide if this is even possible. The other bottle neck was that not every texture artist could really paint like that. We had to specialize. In previous games, an artist might do a whole level. We sort of specialize, so the guys who could make those beautiful paintings, they're the only ones texturing, they're the ones touching those things. The result is we really pulled off that style we wanted. Two and a half months in, finally those art samples started clicking. It really freed up a lot of polygons and texture for the foreground, so we could make everything really high res.

McGinn:That experimentation part, figuring out how to make things 3D, was so critical. You look around at the concept art, people comment on how pretty it is. Well, that's great, you need talented people. But the hard part is taking that beautiful concept art and realizing it on technology.

Mapara: Something we're doing… even Zelda, if you look at that, it's so beautiful but… we're really watching our pixel scale. Sometimes you might have a 512 map on a character, so there's a lot of resolution for a small amount of screen space. Then the ground might be a 256 texture, and you see all these blown-out textures. We're trying to keep our pixel scale really similar, so you don't have something really sharp or something that's really blurry, that sort of stuff. It's ok if things get blurry farther away, because that's how our eyes work. But it doesn't make sense if something in the foreground is really blurry, something in the midground is sharp, something in the background is blurry. Because we're using traditional art as our basis, it holds up really strong. When you rely on the gimmicks of the technology, then it gets really outdated fast and doesn't hold up to the next bit of technology. Good color theory will switch over from one game to another.

McGinn: We work in two week sprints, and the team reviews everything we've done together. There's an instance where we put the concept art up on one monitor, and have the actual game running up on another monitor, and people on our own team who had been involved in the process didn't realize it was the game. They thought it was all concept art. Then when the camera starts moving, they were like, "Whoa! That's unbelievable."



You seem to be working a little more freedom into the Crash universe.

McGinn: It's really reflected by our work philosophy. I treat my designers like that as well. These guys are serious gamers, really good designers. I let them have a lot of responsibility. Our fighting guy, it feels like his baby in some ways. He's just so passionate, he's here till 10 every night making these little tweaks, trying to get the rock-paper-scissors thing working for all our creatures.

This hook came out of the idea we had in the last Crash, the racing game where the cars could merge; this idea that the enemy could be your friend. And we wanted to do a true action adventure game this time. This one guy on the team is a big Smash Brothers fan, so he was like, what if the characters can jump on each other? What would they do with each other's powers? And from that we just sort of moved on to where we are now.

How did you want to treat the visuals?

Mapara: We think of it as very painterly. We wanted to be able to strike some beauty into it. Like when you come out into a sunlit vista, we want to spark some emotion. A truly cartoony style, with flat saturated colors and stuff wouldn't really do that, and yet we're trying to keep it in the cartoon world as well. We made choices: is this something that can be beautiful, or is this something that can be more silly? It's all still very stylized. We really wanted it to have an emotional quality.

When you think about the first Crash, it looked so revolutionary. There really wasn't anything like it before.

Mapara: Absolutely. You know, we try to construct things in a way that people can really appreciate… It makes me think about this one day when I woke up and walked outside, I opened my door and it was just really beautiful and sunny, and I couldn't help but think what a great day it was. I realized how it was the exact same composition, the trees, everything was there the day before. What made it feel so different and beautiful, it had been cloudy for a week, and then all the sudden you come out and it's sunny. It was simply that change, that contrast. If it was sunny every day, you probably wouldn't have that same realization. So we try to use the contrast in our style. If we want to make someone feel like they're stepping out into the sunlight, and just acknowledge that, then we did a good job of presentation. We might have them going through the dense jungle for a while, and then open it up and drop them in these little constructed areas that are very deliberate, in hopes that the audience will really feel something.

"One of the things I'm really proud of, rather than just a lot of levels...we worked really hard to make the levels make sense within the story."

–Joe McGinn, lead designer

You're going for more of a linear experience, right?
McGinn: Yeah, it's pretty much straight forward.

With the presentation though, it seems to lend the impression of a vast and open world you're moving through.
McGinn: Yeah, we definitely wanted the illusion of nonlinearity. That was something we achieved on Simpson's Hit & Run. Some people complained that there was no city map anywhere you could actually get to. That was an intentional choice... People talked about how confused they were, how hard it was to navigate. And were like, "Yes, we pulled it off!" All these different techniques of faking it and making it feel like a real place.

You ever talk about really opening the game up, taking it to a totally different place?
McGinn: We're talking about that, yeah, we talked about that a lot. [Laughs.] I don't know how much I should talk to you about the next games. I guess all I can say is, we're talking about it.

The multiplayer co-op game where you can work together seems pretty unique.
McGinn: Yeah, there's one feature that's really unique as far as I know, which sort of came out of the idea that we didn't want to go split screen. The platforming created some real challenges for us, because if you've got these series of rope swings, you have to get across, and you get separated. The camera may not see you both, or if one of you dies it's very hard to work without some sort of split screen. So one of our designers came up with what he calls leap-frogging platforming. The question was, what if you can jack each other? So you can jump on each other's back. It works literally like when you were a kid playing leap frog. Every time you jump or do something and you land, they swap and the other play takes control. So it is actual cooperative gameplay, you're not just two players on the screen when you're platforming. So you'll jump, there will be a sound effect, then I'll jump. If I connect onto a rope, then you're going to swing, and we'll swap in mid air, and so forth. You really get into this rhythm with the other player.

Is the tech an evolution of what you've had in the past?
Ryan Ridout, technology director: Yeah, we've been building on this for a while. On top of that, there's stuff… it's a fighting game, right. A fighting game and a driving game have very different technologies, although they do share a lot of the same renderings and effects. The combat, that actually came from a game before that didn't shipped. So that part of the engine is going to be used for the first time.

What kind of level themes are you providing Crash to explore?
Mapara: There's this giant, mutant tree, the size of a building. We've modeled it after an olive tree. You're running inside the tree and out, the inside is all swamplike and murky. The time of day is sunrise, so you'll see through the openings all these sort of peachy streams of light flooding in. Outside, it's really bright. It's one level where you're constantly in and out, going higher and higher.
McGinn: There's a weapons factory. You know N. Gin? Sort of this hyper guy with the rocket for a head? He's got some of the best scenes in the game. Every level, every theme is built on the story. So he's constructing the weapons for the giant robot the bad guys are building. You get here after going through this beach night scene, where all these rockets are falling on you. There's the Wumpa island and the environmental destruction that leads to it in the opening of the game. We're not hitting you over the head with this, but it's sort of a subtle nod that certain actions have consequences in our world.
Ridout: And like Yousuf was saying, there really is a lot of contrast in every level. In the weapons factory, you can imagine what the inside of a weapon's factory would look like. But behind the scenes, there's also what the people pushers are doing. There's actually people back there in offices. So you find yourself going from area to area, where machines are pounding and weapons are being made, and then you're in the midst of file cabinets and folders and whatnot. Every level has this attention to going back and forth.
Mapara: There's even these shower areas, the workmen shower areas.
McGinn: One of the things I'm really proud of, rather than just a lot of levels—the lava level and the ice level like a lot of platformers have—we worked really hard to make the levels make sense within the story. You start out in the island, the beautiful lush jungles, rivers and lots of water and stuff. As you travel through, you get to a point where the bad guys are trying to destroy the world. Further you go, you get into a lava level, where they're sucking minerals out of the ground, sort of hellish.

You were talking about the importance of feedback on the game. It was interesting, some of the reactions you mentioned to the choices you're making.
Kirsten Forbes, producer: Yeah, and it's interesting what you asked about being able to take the enemy with you for long stretches, we were just recently working on the finishing moves when you dispatch an enemy. During some focus tests, people

really felt like they had earned this monster and they didn't want to give him up. They were actually forging a relationship with this guy. We really labored on, well, if you're going to have to get rid of them, how can we make that a funny experience for you? The input has been huge. We've had a group shadow us through the entire project, we're giving them credit as, like, junior designers on the game.
Mapara: Even before we went into production, we lined up all our enemies, and we asked what were the favorites, and if they all had different favorites, we've done a good job. If we have a well-balanced set of enemies, that's a good outcome. We went through maybe a hundred different monsters, just spent a lot of time in our concept stage. Even deciding what was properly scary… You want to create these characters that really create a sense of power. We started to work more on giving the characters more visual cues that relate to their powers.

The boxing meter concept... I like that.
McGinn: Yeah, you're not actually just wearing them down. I can't kick a character and come back and have the damage stay. He actually has a meter that goes up and down over time. You have to stick with him and fight him. That was a big step in the gameplay. The combat designer felt really strongly, deciding that if we didn't do something like this, you wouldn't be enticed as much to get into the deeper mechanics we put into the game. It works really well, you can really get right into it. To get it right, our interface designer went through a lot of different iterations to communicate that well. We really debated this a lot.
Ridout: We've had a very adaptable development process, where if we want to try something, we go for it. We don't say, if it's not in the original design document, then we're not going to do it. We had a system that was completely hit-point based, walk in, hit him, and so forth. We had basically moved on to work on other features, but the combat designer came in and said, this actually could be a lot better, and now it is.
McGinn: Every two weeks, we re-evaluate all the features, and put the most important ones that are most valuable to the player at the top of the list. And the whole team gets together on that Monday and we plan out what we're going to do for the next two weeks. We basically demo to each other. And by that process, what you end up in the end is a bunch of stuff that might not have enough value and can be reworked, rather than getting to the end and saying, "Oh s**t, if we had a better jacking system, the game could be great instead of good."

Naruto Ultimate Ninja 2

Another pitch-perfect fighter for Naruto fans

words Heather Campbell

Last week, while shooting a commercial in Texas, I stood next to a 12 year old kid while the crew set up the lighting for the next shot. We were in a pizza restaurant, and flashing on the television screens was the afternoon broadcast of Naruto on Cartoon Network. I leaned over and said, "This is my favorite show on TV right now," and he looked at me like I'd just told him I was made of candy. The two of us watched in Close-Captioned silence as Hinata took on Neji, and soon a few extras had joined us to see what we were staring at. The battle was dynamic enough to keep them interested, but after a few minutes, someone leaned over and whispered, "I don't have any idea what is going on."

I was lucky enough to jump on the Naruto bandwagon early. I can see how, to an outsider, the show and its world would be daunting and insular, like tuning in to an episode of Gundam after being stuck in a shed for the last twenty years. Naruto is a ninja soap-opera; the characters all have specific relationships, the story is dense and serial, and the episode numbers (in Japan) are now in the 200s. The show is a juggernaut, and if you don't start at the beginning, it's just going to be an impossible story to conquer.

Naruto: Ultimate Ninja 2 is made for fans already entrenched in the world of Konoha and the hidden ninja villages. The game is so burdened by details that it feels overwhelming—there's no element of the show that isn't addressed by CyberConnect2. Nothing is overlooked. For someone like me, that's great. For a gamer who isn't already enthusiastic about Naruto, the game will just be an obsessive fighter with quirky characters and unbalanced powers. Relationships

"Just like the show proper, the game has a filler arc."

between the protagonists might be inferred, but the story will lack heart if you're catching it via your PS2 for the first time. There's your warning.

Now. For the Naruto fans: Guys. Seriously. You've got to check this game out. It's pretty great. Everything has been thrown in, as if the designers were anime addicts, otaku with the power and money to make a game. It's sick. In fact, writing about it right now is making me want to get up and play it some more. I wish you guys could try this version of the game; the early build I have is full English text, with Japanese voice acting. So few anime games are designed with subtitle fans in mind—it makes me acutely sad that this won't be available in retail. The dubbing is likely to be as grating as it is on Cartoon Network, which is a real shame. The original cast is perfect.

There's so much to do in Ultimate Ninja 2. Bandai-Namco is giving us a big bag of toys, with play modes ranging from Vs. Fighting, to RPG-style adventuring, to minigames. It's also a plot review for fans of the show, as well as a totally new story written just for the game. That's right: just like the show proper, Ultimate Ninja 2 has a filler arc. One more way in which the game feels genuine.

For compulsive players, there are tons of unlockable trinkets, like cards and customizations, music, movies and additional characters. There are 30 characters in all, making the selection screen seem similar to Marvel Vs. Capcom 2.

The insane special attacks will ignite MvC flashbacks as well; the 20 second sequences of button-mashing almost feel like super-move parodies. The fighting system of Naruto: Ultimate Ninja 2 is not a delicately balanced chess game. It's more like Smash Brothers or Rival Schools. With basic moves doing so little damage, you're going to have to engage the rhythm-action-style special-move cut-scenes in order to defeat an opponent. As another nod to Smash Brothers, playfields are multi-tiered arenas, and to get an exemplary grade at the end of a match, you'd better bounce between every one of them.

Aside from the fighting, the small sequences of running through town make me hungry for a more open-ended, sandbox Naruto title. I wish I could just hang out in Konoha, or dash across the treetops platformer style. As much as I love Ultimate Ninja 2, it's just well-developed enough that it makes me realize just what kind of Naruto game I'm really aching for. With any luck, I'll get to see something like that show up on the newer systems.

Naruto Ultimate Ninja 2 preview

System(s)	Playstation 2
Developer	CyberConnect2
Publisher	Bandai
Available	Q2/03 2007

Eternal Sonata

RPG in A minor...

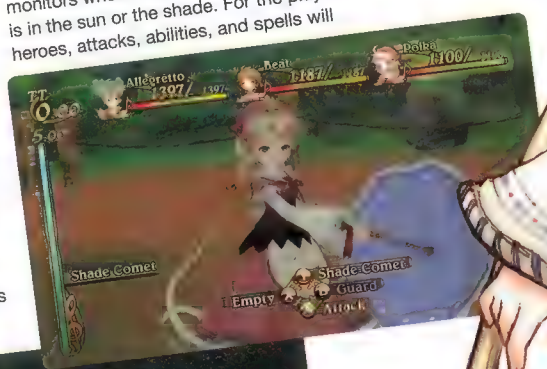
words Greg Orlando

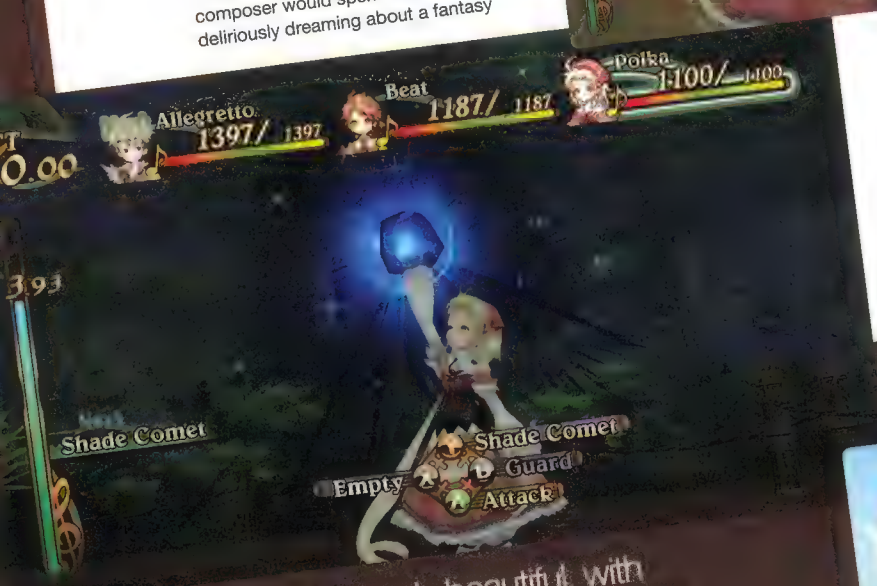
Frederic Chopin—not the real one, the real one died in 1849—wears a ridiculous top hat adorned with feathers. He pals around with characters such as the camera-wielding, photo-taking Beat; the young sorceress Polka; and her thief boyfriend Allegretto. He fights against a series of fantastical monsters with what appears to be a conductor's baton.

In short, he's having a hell of a video game dream. Namco's music-themed role-playing title suggests the famous 19th century composer Chopin, while on his deathbed, dreamed of a strange world in which he could create magic. That world, of course, plays out in the action-heavy Eternal Sonata.

"You're a strange man, Frederic," Polka tells Chopin early on in Sonata, and truer words may never have been spoken. Polka and Chopin meet in the land of Tenuto, and are quickly immersed in a storyline so Byzantine and complicated it might require a nuclear physicist to puzzle it out. Namco employees try bravely to explain about a flower medicine that is replaced in popularity by a new powder sold by unscrupulous members of a government, as if a dying Polish composer would spend his last few hours deliriously dreaming about a fantasy world and its pharmaceutical industry.

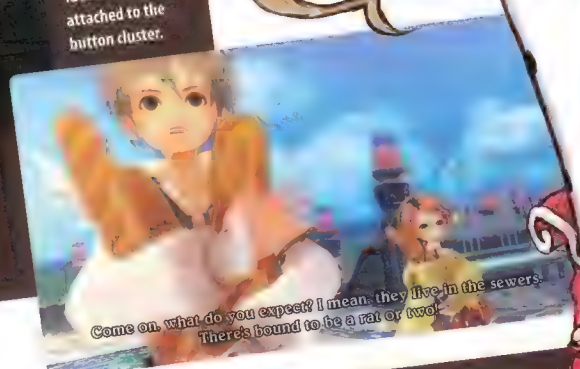
No matter; the game is simply beautiful, with gorgeous backgrounds featuring cities kissed by rainbows or citadels decorated with multicolored stained glass windows. It offers three-man action-based fighting. In a brief playtest, Chopin, Beat, and Polka faced off against a huge bipedal dinosaur-like creature with a great, fat belly and enormously large sword. Combat shifts automatically among the characters, meaning players get to control each party member when it's his or her turn. During combat, all-too-brief prompts appear on screen, offering players the opportunity to quickly press a button on the Xbox 360 controller and thus either block an enemy strike or defend against it and issue a counterattack. A special mechanic monitors whether a character (or monster) is in the sun or the shade. For the player's heroes, attacks, abilities, and spells will

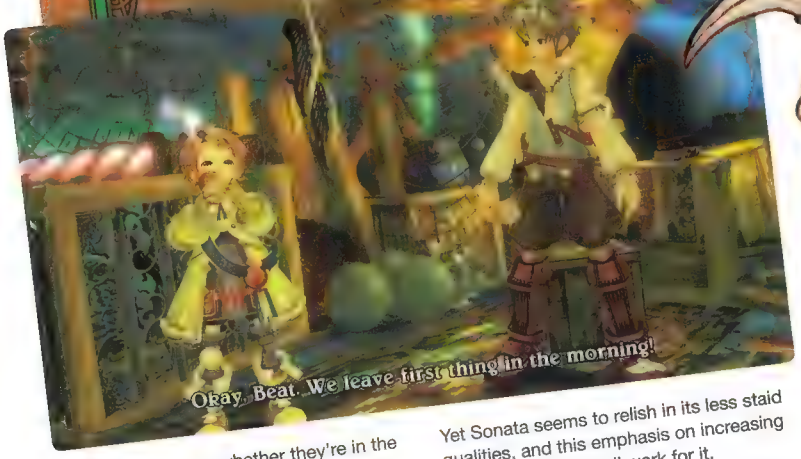




"...the game is simply beautiful, with gorgeous backgrounds featuring cities kissed by rainbows..."

Tactics are neatly attached to the button cluster.





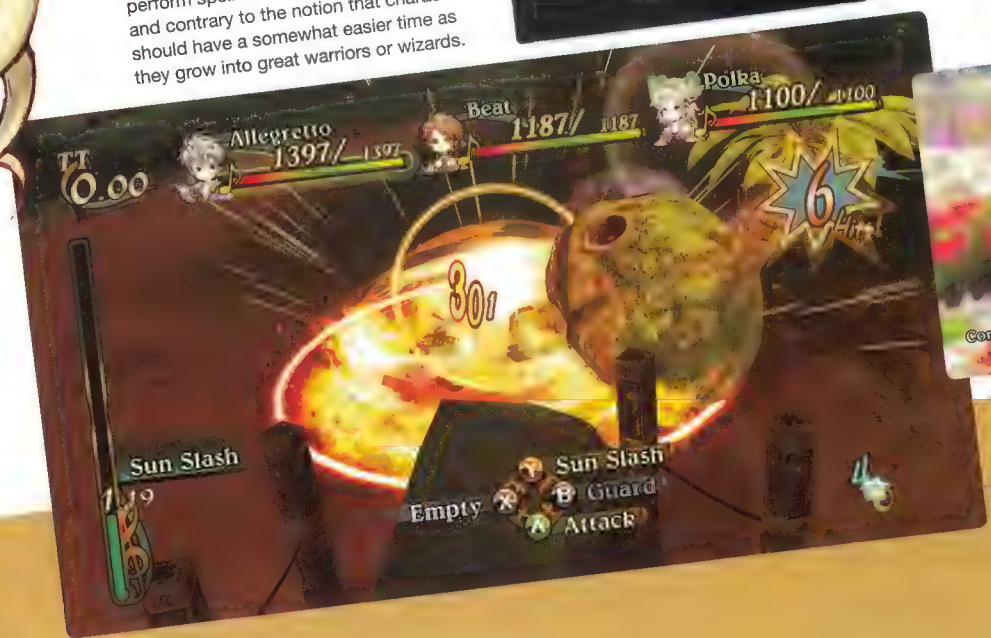
vary depending on whether they're in the light or the darkness. Some monsters, in turn, will be able to change their appearance depending on the lighting.

Attacks are mapped to the Xbox 360 controller's face buttons, and the game displays exactly what each button does on the screen. This comes in handy because, during later levels, the button configuration will switch. Namco representatives suggest this is done to increase the difficulty of the combat as characters become more powerful; the difficulty level is further augmented by a gradual reduction in the time players are given to attack and perform spells. This seems particularly odd and contrary to the notion that characters should have a somewhat easier time as they grow into great warriors or wizards.

Yet Sonata seems to relish in its less staid qualities, and this emphasis on increasing the difficulty may well work for it.

Needless to say, Sonata seems more than just your standard, beautiful Japanese role-playing title. As to how unique it is, well, that demands an extended playtest.

Eternal Sonata	
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Tri-Crescendo
Publisher	Namco-Bandai
Available	Summer



Giant chunks of living topography don't deserve to live.

Alien Syndrome

Space 1987, revisited.

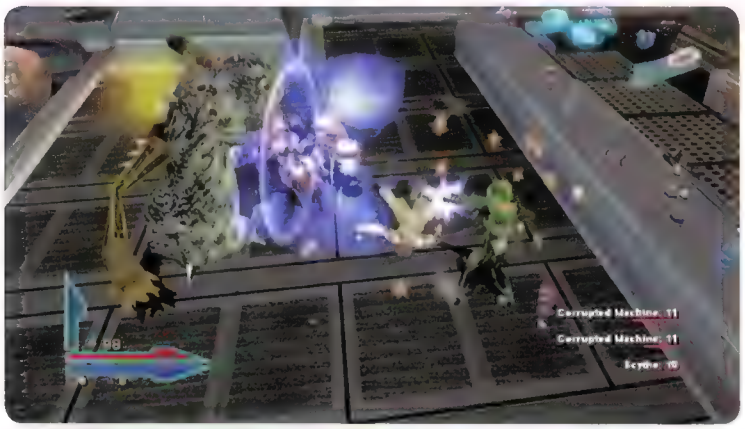
words Greg Orlando

The Wayback Machine has been heated up and aimed at 1987. Sega's arcade game Alien Syndrome has been yanked, kicking and screaming from the not-too-distant past for a date with the 21st century.

Syndrome will see release for both Wii and the PSP this summer. To make Syndrome more console friendly, and perhaps more relevant, Sega and developer Totally Games have tacked on a story and role-playing game elements, but this is like putting racing stripes on a thoroughbred. It's a nice gesture, but shooting bugs in space really need not be dressed up overmuch.

So. The game introduces Aileen Harding, a woman all beat-up over a failed rescue, and drops her into the killing zones. It's possible to start Harding off as a demolitions expert, firebug, seal, tank, or sharpshooter, and each of these starting classes confers a nominal advantage in one area or another. The tank, for example, is inclined toward melee weapons and can, initially, only employ close-quarters tactics against foes. As the game progresses, and Harding gains experience, her inclinations can be modified at will, making the initial class choice sort of irrelevant after too long.

For the Nintendo Wii, the game's great draw will be its motion-sensitive controls. The game has certainly been upgraded graphically from the PSP version, and brightened somewhat to bring it more in line with that console's sensibilities, but its core remains unchanged between the versions: 40 levels, lots of bug killing, lather, rinse, repeat.



Targeting for guns and the like is handled with the Wii remote. A cursor tracks the direction of gunfire, and a slight turn of the wrist allows for the adjustment of the cursor and, thus, 360 degrees of aiming. The Wii nunchuk handles Harding's movements. At once, it's an interesting scheme, tempered by the fact that any exaggerated movements tend to jerk the aiming cursor right off the screen. Once the simple lesson that less, here, is certainly better is hammered home, this control setup becomes perfectly functional. Maneuvers such as circling and strafing are really easy to perform, and this is nothing if not a boon given the frantic nature of Syndrome's play. Other small extras for the Wii version include the ability to wrist-flick for melee weapons, something that will be wholly optional considering the game's length and its reliance on combat, and some minigames that will use the remote and nunchuk to allow Harding to access computers and the like.

Expect lots of running and gunning down tightly packed metallic corridors, and creepy alien monsters such as giant, brownish-yellow centipedes and electricity-shooting blue spiked orbs. Over the course of 40 levels, Harding will get to travel to the surface of a terraformed planet and, eventually, to the mothership itself. She'll also be able to harness the abilities of a helper robot (Scarab) to sell or manufacture items she might need in her bug hunt.

Just like old times...only better

Alien Syndrome	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Totally Games
Publisher	Sega
Available	Summer 2007

Forza Motorsport 2

The word would be carlust...

words Greg Orlando

Forza 2 Motorsport delicately balances the fine line between fanatical devotion to all things automotive and, to put it delicately, barking insanity.

The developers use the word carlust to describe the game's, pardon the pun, driving philosophy. This more than anything else puts the game's slavish attention to detail in some perspective. At a recent Microsoft-held press day, the people in charge of previewing Forza would digress into discussions of real-world tire physics entirely too boring to recount. There is to be no discussion on the matter; the developers are nothing if not determined to create a true-to-life driving experience in Forza 2 for the Xbox 360.

This time around, there will be more than 300 cars to choose from, representing such brands as Ferrari, Porsche, Honda, Mitsubishi, Toyota, Lamborghini, etc. Each of the cars has its own set of specifications and limitations in terms of speed and handling, and the developers have instituted a wear- and damage system that influences a car's performance, as well. Smash into walls or other cars, and a finely tuned piece of automotive finery may quickly become a junker ready for the scrapheap.

As part of carlust, players will get to modify their vehicles with all sorts of brakes, engines, tires, suspension kits, and other parts. They'll also get to decorate their vehicles using a paint-and decal editor allowing for approximately six billion (give or take) unique designs, Microsoft claims. These vehicles can then be taken on the road in 12 environments and 45 tracks. Players can also augment their experience with tiered online tournaments, and each of these contests will have its own set of requirements that must be fulfilled in order to enter.

A virtual economy for cars, parts, and paintjobs will play out in a brand-new auction house. Here, the developers emphasized it will be possible for people, should they so choose, to form a cottage industry of sorts, producing decorations and designs for car exteriors that could then be sold and used, say, to buy powerful cars. Ebay-like functions allow for instant (buy now) purchases, the setting of time limits for auctions, and "featured" listings for products.

Carlust met the road when Microsoft showed off the game at GDC. Forza was playable on a setup that was a car fanatic's paradise—multiple screens, rumble chair, and force feedback steering wheel. Here, it was possible to note exactly how true-to-life (read: punishing) Forza can be. And few who've ever experienced the lust would want it any other way.

"the developers are nothing if not determined to create a true-to-life driving experience in Forza 2"

who could ask for anything more?

Forza Motorsport 2	
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Turn 10
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	May

Pirates of the Caribbean
At World's End

Caribbean Cruise . . .

The salty buccaneers from Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* are setting sail for their latest and greatest adventure in Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End. The game, coming out for a host of consoles and handhelds, will see release at the same time as the upcoming third *Pirates* film, titled *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*.

Caribbean features Jack Sparrow, Will Turner, and Elizabeth Swann, as playable characters and Disney has scanned the likenesses of Johnny Depp, Orlando Bloom, and Keira Knightley to ensure the protagonists look like their actor counterparts. It's also interesting to note the characters' movements are true-to-life, with motion capture techniques perfectly replicating, say, Depp's rendition of Sparrow's arrogant sashay.

World's End combines elements from the second and soon-to-be-released third *Caribbean* film. As the pirate Sparrow and his adventurer cohorts, players will get to revisit a host of locations and scenes from the films: the British-held harbor Port Royal; Isla Cruces; Peligrosto, home to many, many cannibals; and the mysterious "World's End" alluded to at the conclusion of the second film. The developers have done a wonderful job with some of these environments; Port Royal, to be sure, was decorated with huge patches of fog and decorated with lots of detail, including a host of wandering Redcoats.

Beyond the standard, swordfighting and punching of cannibals (or blowing them up with explosive grenades), Caribbean lets players tackle huge beasts such as the ship-crushing kraken. Here, players need to use the game's environments to stymie the beast's huge, grabby tentacles; swords can be lit on fire and then used to explode barrels of powder. Later still, platforming elements liberally borrowed from Ubisoft's Prince of Persia games are used to, say, create sequences of derring-do: sword-assisted jumps across platforms, and the game's characters walking across perilously narrow beams. Here, the PlayStation 3 version of the game will, predictably, use the Sixaxis' controller's motion sensitivity to control the character's balance.

The game's Wii version makes use of that console's motion-sensitive Wii remote and nunchuk controllers. Swordfighting is accomplished with strokes of the remote; horizontal swipes perform light attacks while vertical movements are used for more potent strikes. Further, enemies can be finessed into objects, or sent flying off of cliffs with special olé moves. Turner can dodge a fat woman's attacks, deftly slipping off to one side or another so she lunges past her target and directly into a large pot. Once she's trapped, Sparrow—who's overhead on a wood-and-rope bridge—will smite her with coconuts.

The high seas await, and World's End might even be worth suffering scurvy for. Time will indeed tell.

"The developers have done a wonderful job with some of these environments..."

The new face of movie-based gaming...

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End	preview
System(s)	Wii, DS, Xbox 360, PS 2, PS 3, PSP
Developer	Eurocom
Publisher	Buena Vista Games
Available	May

Xbox 360 version shown

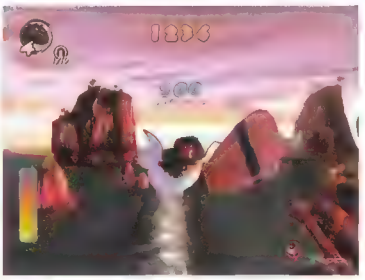
Surf's Up

Birds of play

words Dave Halverson

I was only able to put in an hour or so with Surf's Up, based on the upcoming surfing bird story from Sony Pictures Animation, but it was enough to realize that like TMNT, yet another promising film adaptation is in capable hands. Surfing games are by nature laid back fun, but add shredding flightless birds to the mix along with mission-oriented wave rides and you've got a bird of a different feather. Playing as Cody, his best bud Chicken Joe, Tank, Geek, Lani and other humanoid pengo's as the competition wears on, the game follows the Pen Gu Island Big Z Memorial Surf Off, where the name of the game is scoring points via a simplistic but nicely integrated host of tricks on massive waves that also incorporate various extreme challenges and obstacles. The game looks great on 360 (for a multi-platform release) and the first few areas were pretty sweet given the early state of our build. ...Waves that always break and never close out—these are some lucky birds. Something tells me that Surf's Up is more than just another penguin movie and I'm betting that with Montreal Studios at the helm the game will follow suit, although I'm not looking forward to seeing the H20 on the lesser consoles.

Surf's Up	preview
System(s)	PS2, PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, PC
Developer	Ubisoft
Publisher	Ubisoft Montreal
Available	May 29



Escape from Bug Island

This game bugged Heather

words Heather Campbell

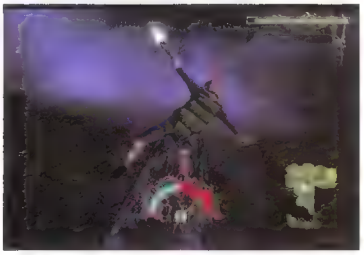
Oh no. That's all you can really think when you drop in a copy of the Wii "Launch Window" title Escape From Bug Island. Even with Eidos' post-import influence, even with some improved play mechanics from its Japanese debut, you can't help but be bewildered by what you're looking at on your television.

Everything about Bug Island is ugly and confounding. You swing your Wiimote with different button combinations to perform High, Low and Medium stick attacks, awkwardly. You shake off bugs the size of your CHEST. But don't worry; they do very little damage, and you can heal your bug wounds by eating oranges. The cut-scenes all use the same music and "old-film" filter. And the level design could best be described as foggy plus trees.

You are Ray, a guy who is secretly in love with Michelle, who is secretly in love with bugs. With your "charming" friend Mike, you arrive on Bug Island so that Michelle can run off and get lost. Using your unexplained mission-sensitive radar, you set off to find Michelle so that the three of you can Escape. From Bug Island.

The game would be better with some variable missions, but the repetitiveness is eventually what does it in... Or at least what I'm pretty sure will do it in.

Escape from Bug Island	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Spike Co., Ltd
Publisher	Eidos Interactive
Available	May 15, 2007



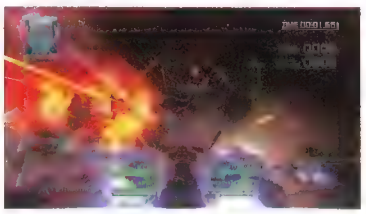
Project Sylpheed

SA-77 Silpheed, reporting for duty off the rails...

words Dave Halverson

Can this be? A 3D shooter on Xbox 360 based on one of the most groundbreaking series of its time? Yes it can. It may be spelled funny (the original was titled Silpheed) but who cares? I don't care if they call it bologna; it's Silpheed on 360!! We've arranged to interview the team for a June issue feature but in the meantime here's what we know: This third game in the series features a multilayered storyline presented in 50 plus minutes of CGI, and is being published by none other than Square Enix who brought us the mind shattering bliss of Einhander on PSOne. Once upon a time shooters ruled the roost, and while I'm not up for a tirade of that magnitude a few a year would certainly be apropos at this juncture. Xyanide was awesome and now this... All I can say is: let there be Darius! How much more amazing can '07 get for 360 users?

Project Sylpheed	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Game Arts/SETA
Publisher	Square Enix
Available	Summer



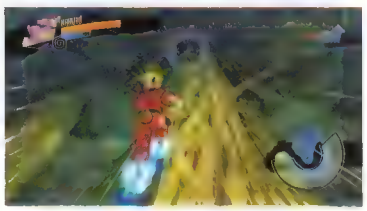
Third generation Silpheed... The 360 is fast becoming a legendary gamers machine.

Naruto

Believe this!

words Dave Halverson

Having reached phenomenon status in record time selling over 60 million manga in Japan alone and being the first manga to bust into the New York Times best seller list, Naruto is just getting started. For his next trick the Nine-Tailed Fox demon-infused ninja-in-training will appear in a game that among other things will stand as the best movie- or anime-based game ever created...How can I say such a thing? I've seen it, and it will blow you away—anime lover or not. This is not, I repeat, not another fighting game, but rather an action RPG so fluid and magnificently produced that when you see it in action you won't believe your eyes. It's that good.



Naruto	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Available	Fall 2007

This sequence in motion is simply hard to believe...

Rocket is here!

Buffy's back! Read all about it! • Free 300 Poster Inside!
MOVIES • DVD • TV • ANIME • MANGA • GAMES • COOL STUFF
ROCKET
TMNT
Proudly poised at the forefront of a new era in CGI, America's fab four are back in business!
Highlander
Kawajiri and Imagi remake the magic
Spider-Man
Tobey and TH Church sp
$5.99US $7.99CAN
05
0 71486 01325 9
Ron Perlman on the big red guy • Free 300 Poster Inside!
ROCKET
grindhouse
Double Feature

Available now everywhere magazines are sold!

Ninja Gaiden Sigma

Can you say "killer app"?

words Brady Fiechter

Ninja Gaiden Sigma: new assets, new textures, new models, new enemy placement, a new weapon—the duel katana—and a few tweaks here and there to prime this update for the brand-new PS3. Add to the list of brush strokes done on Ninja Gaiden Black perhaps the most enticing for fans—a playable Rachel, who extends the first game's 16 chapters out to 19 with three new levels of her own. "The background that's going to be going on in her chapters is something that's all new and will pretty interesting," explains lead developer Yosuke Hayashi. "If you remember, she had a sister, named Alma, who had been turned into a fiend. She was trying to search her out so she could basically kill her own sister and put her out of her misery. But we never really got into what happened to them before the story begins or what their relationship was, and that's what's going to be the focus: the relationship between these two sisters. Why was Alma turned into a fiend, why is Rachel so motivated to find her?"

Rachel seems to feel quite a bit different from Ryu, as you'd hope, less immediately aggressive and slower in the grace of her movements. She possesses some devastatingly powerful combos; in one instance she flings the enemy over her head with the giant sweep of her warhammer. After the quick hands-on, I discuss Sigma with lead developer Yosuke Hayashi.

Interview

Yosuke Hayashi
Lead Developer

"And for us, we feel we definitely have the top graphics on PS3 right now."

Yosuke Hayashi, Lead Developer

Play: How do you balance between an update and making something dramatically different?
Yosuke Hayashi: One of our key goals is to get this game that we still feel is one of the best action games on the market, even though it's three years old and bring that to a new platform and a whole new audience. While keeping the essence of Ninja Gaiden in tact, that being the story, the overall characters, we know that it needs to be at the technical level for 2007. We want people to put the game in and immediately say, "Wow, this is a cutting edge game." Not only do we have the heritage of Ninja Gaiden, but the tradition of Team Ninja is to make the prettiest game on that platform at the time it's released. But the thing we had to really pay attention to was the action elements, because we still feel Ninja Gaiden Black is the best action game on the market; nothing's really been able to beat it in that space. We're not just content to leave it as is. How can we one-up ourselves? How can we challenge ourselves to do something new? People who are familiar with the series will especially be able to latch onto the many refinements.

What are some of the most substantial upgrades?
The first thing, the graphics obviously. We felt that we had the best graphics on the Xbox three years ago, and the whole point of doing a new game in the series is to make sure you're leading the edge on your platform. And for us, we feel we definitely have the top graphics on PS3 right now. With the gameplay, we're obviously not satisfied to rest on our laurels. There's a lot of gameplay improvements made too. We're not totally changing what Ninja Gaiden is, but in terms of new animations, new weapons, tightening up the control and the responsiveness—we're really addressing a lot.
Since this is an action game, the point is seeing the character onscreen, seeing what he does. So for us, it's about asking ourselves, what would we want to see, what kind of animations and visuals would make us really happy? Going back and kind of saying, what can we tweak from a playability aspect, and the animations to further raise the bar since we have all this new power with the PlayStation 3 hardware.

There are the more dramatic improvements you see right away on the PS3, but those shadows... they look really good.
In the original Xbox game, the shadows

were fairly limited. For Ninja Gaiden Sigma, we have full self shadowing in real time in both cut scenes and in the game itself, running at 60 frames. As far as we know, we're the first game running at 60 frames with self shadowing for a home system.

What game out there is challenging you to make an even better product?
People who really understand action games and what makes them compelling can look at something like Devil May Cry and see how shallow it is. Or look at a game like Genji and see that the gameplay really isn't there. But I think the guys who are doing Gears of War look at Ninja Gaiden and understand what we do that brings the genre forward, what we do right. And by the same token, when we look at God of War, we say these guys really know what they're doing. We have a lot of respect.

Is it as satisfying working on a project that's not entirely from the ground up? Is the approach much different?
It's very fulfilling to work on a game like this; we're just so focused on the game in so many ways. One hundred percent of my efforts are on the game, I just don't have time to think about other things. Leading the action game genre is a pretty tough job and requires a lot of dedication, and it's definitely exciting to be on the cutting edge and show the industry that, hey, whether it's a new title or a title like this, we're still pushing the envelope no matter what we do. When people see this game, I think they're going to wonder, what else will come out of Team Ninja? One of the key roles of this game is to definitely bring new people into the fold, to show people that even if you're the least bit interested in action games, here's this amazing example at the top of the field. If you've never played it before, you really owe it to yourself to play it. And that's why we have to have the graphics and the gameplay at the absolute best it can be to lead the genre in 2007. But we know there are a lot of players who have been playing Ninja Gaiden for a while, and we include a lot of stuff to make them happy. Making Rachel a playable character is probably the top request we've gotten from people.

Do you appreciate the challenge of transitioning to new hardware?
We feel like this is what we've been put on this earth to do. When a new piece of hardware comes out, we're excited to the challenge of getting the most out of it. Obviously there are difficulties, but we never see them as a burden.

With all the rising costs and market and climate shifts, with the new pressures of making a game now, how do you respond?
You're very true, things are changing. And if we wanted to battle those pressures, we could obviously. If we just took the Xbox version and released a straight port, that would be very quick and cheap. But for us to do that would be spitting in the faces of our fans. We definitely feel a duty and obligation to provide the absolute best experience. We'll always be doing the very best that we can do. You can't really use, for instance, there not being a big enough installed user base as an excuse for not making the best game possible.

What is it about making games that you love so much?
I think that what we do is one of the few jobs where you can actively bring happiness into people's lives. We're happy making the games, people are happy playing them. Games provide a conduit that sort of allows us to share that with people. That's a joy for us. You talked earlier about your deadline and having to pull an all nighter, and asked us if we had similar stuff during crunch time. For us, it doesn't really phase us. Once again, you have a goal in mind, you know what you need to do and you just do whatever needs to be done to fulfill that.

What are some of the more difficult, most interesting things that come up during that process?
[Laughs.] When people are making games, they're very creative people, they're very opinionated. And they have their own unique ideas. Usually people are working in the same direction, but sometimes there are those unique ideas that can be difficult to address, and the creator is really adamant about what he wants. We had this guy Mr. A, and this other guy Mr. B, and they both had these ideas about how a certain function should work. They both had these design plans that they couldn't agree on, there was just no compromise. So Mr. B eventually just decided to completely ignore Mr. A, even though they were sitting right next to each other. There are times like that I have to sit down with both parties. That creates a problem on the R&D floor when you've got that negative energy going on. The thing is, they both had good ideas, but they're just so passionate that they can have blinders on and not see the whole picture. And you have to understand, we love what we do so much. When we fight, we really fight, we almost come to blows. This isn't your typical argument between friends. It's not about showing off or trying to outclass or make yourself known to management. It's those moments where we use everything in our brains to squeeze out anything that can make the game even a hundredth of a percent better. We really do treat it like ninjas; it's a life or death situation for us.

Ninja Gaiden is a classic that goes way back to the NES. What was one of your favorites that you still respect today?
It'd probably have to be Excite Bike. You know how you could make your own tracks? I would always make the most unbelievable difficult tracks to try and challenge my friends. Also, I have a younger brother, we weren't on the best of terms when we were kids, so we would always compete. In the first Mario Bros., not the Super, but the very first, we would always end up killing each other and never get past the first level.

Fable 2

Peter Molyneux is nothing if not honest. "I showed off presents I didn't have," he says about the Xbox role-playing game Fable. By this he means he promised features for the game that, given time restraints and technological limitations, he simply couldn't provide.

Molyneux, however, has reformed for Fable 2. Now, he says, there are three great features in the Xbox 360 RPG. As a brand-new man, he says, he is only going to reveal one of them.

The great feature is not the ability to play as either a man or a woman. That's certainly being included in the game, but is not what Molyneux is pushing. It's not the ability to have unprotected sex, either, or for female characters to go into labor and give birth. Nor is it the ability to use guns in the game, seeing as how Fable 2 is set 500

There's more, a lot more to
but it seems to pale in com
the inclusion of a hu

years in the mythical land of Albion's future.

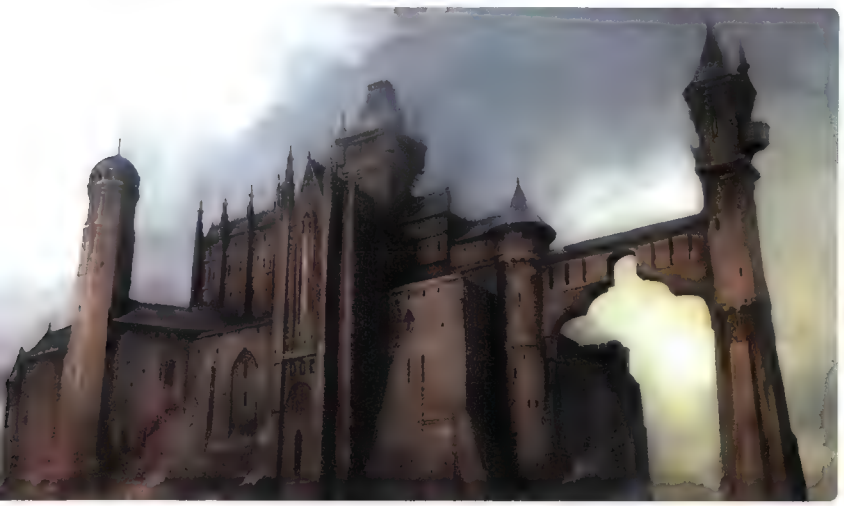
The big feature for Fable 2 is a dog that plays dead when its master rips a nasty fart. Sort of.

Every player in Fable 2 will have access to a dog. In the game, this dog will be a faithful companion guided, Molyneux says, by three great laws. It will never aggravate you, he says, will love you unconditionally, and can look after itself. This means that there are no buttons on the Xbox 360 to control the dog. It also means that when a game tester decides to pick up the dog's ball and hurl it off a cliff, the dog will be smart enough to preserve its own life.

In gameplay, the dog will serve as a guide, pointing out paths and alerting its master to potential threats. When it comes time to enter combat, the dog will assault the threat it deems most dangerous to its owner. When the hero pulls a gun, the dog will attack creatures holding melee weapons. If its master draws a sword, the dog will take down foes that might use ranged weapons against its master.

It's only when the dog becomes injured that Molyneux's true plan for it is revealed. As the dog gimps bravely back to its master's side, Molyneux simply directs the hero to run away from it. The dog, gravely injured, will follow its master across the world.

"Once you care, I have got you," Molyneux says. The dog's true purpose in the game is to make players experience human emotion, be it love, or sadness, or simple guilt. As Molyneux runs away, the crowd at the Game Developers Conference reacts in horror. Molyneux, ever the showman, suggests he might take his hero and run off to a faraway pub for a drink. Hours later, he suggests, the dog will appear at the pub door, scratching at it for its master's attention. Its simple, unconditional love, even for a hero who abandoned it, never wanes and will, undoubtedly, always evoke some kind of response.



We can only imagine what lies in wait inside ...

There's more, a lot more to Fable 2, but it seems to pale in comparison to the inclusion of a human factor. Players will able to buy just about anything in the game, be it outdoor stalls, houses, or castles. There will also be a storehouse for each player, a place where physical gold can be piled up to show off a hero's great wealth. It will also be possible to buy enough property to become the king (or emperor) of the city of Bowerstone.

This time around, it's possible to take what Molyneux says at face value. He's a changed man and, in this case, it's definitely a change for the best.

Fable 2	
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Lionhead
Publisher	Microsoft
Available	TBA

Dawn of Mana

It's a new Dawn

words Dave Halverson

Dawn of Mana	
System(s)	PS2
Developer	Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Available	May 22

Interview

Mana series creator Koichi Ishii

play: What brought you back to the franchise after all these years?
Koichi Ishii: I'd have to say that the great support and ongoing demand for Mana series games by fans have been our main motivation. Also, when we were first introduced to Havok—the popular physics-based engine—games at E3 several years ago, we believed that this would provide a unique opportunity to combine the technical advantages of Havok with basic rules of gameplay to add a realistic feel to the world of Mana in 3D.
By making the leap to 3D and adding the Havok engine, we felt the obvious enhancements to the classic image of the series justified calling the game Seiken Densetsu 4.
(Note: Seiken Densetsu 4 is the first numbered release in eleven years; the last release of a Mana title was ten months ago.)

"We didn't consider the functionality of the PS2 when we were designing the game but focused on how to create the kind of world we envisioned." ~ Koichi Ishi

You've done away with most of the game's tried and true RPG elements in favor of a stage-clear action game (albeit a very original one). Being the first 3D Mana, is this why you've chosen to change up the gameplay to such a great extent?
The changes in gameplay weren't a direct result of the move to 3D. As we considered what it is that makes an adventure game fun, such as the simple pleasures of exploring and experiencing a new world, we naturally began to make the shift toward a more action-oriented game. We were also developing Children of Mana at the same time and wanted to differentiate the two.

Will future Manas follow this construct?
The legendary Mana series has long been known for its innovative approach to each title, so we can't guarantee that we will use the same system on subsequent games.

How did the MONO system come about? Its certainly adds a whole new dimension to field battles!
The MONO or "object" system was a natural outgrowth of the development process as we integrated the laws of physics into the complex atmosphere of a 3D environment. In Children of Mana we introduced the concept of unpredictable outcomes based on player action. In Dawn of Mana we wanted to go a step further by having both animate and inanimate objects actually interact with the player character. In this way the player becomes an integral part of the game as each action may have multiple consequences to consider.

The fields and intricacy of the character models are superb—the game is breathtaking. You're getting so much out of the PS2!
We didn't consider the functionality of the PS2 when we were designing the game but focused on how to create the kind of world we envisioned. It's hard to put into words the depiction of myriad natural elements (e.g., hills, forests, coastlines, or even the vine on Keldric's arm) so carefully detailed in the game. But, thanks to the breadth of technical resources at Square Enix, we believe we realized our vision. We hope, too, that the emotional range of characters like Keldric will be enhanced by the artwork, allowing the player to feel their ups and downs as the game progresses.

That said, the game does seem designed with a Western gamer in mind… Any comment?
We didn't make any conscious effort to gear the game to Westerners, though in retrospect, one could argue that it ended up in that direction. Of course, we're delighted if our fans in the West feel that way.

Guitar Hero 1&2

All the world's a stage

words Dave Halverson

There's something truly magical about Guitar Hero. Even though you're strapping on a plastic guitar, it's an ax nevertheless—covered with stickers and appropriately personalized if you truly rock—and you want to rock the house...your house. Everybody who frequents the game knows the feeling, when the prompts melt away and you find yourself actually playing the music; that's why Guitar Hero is the best music game ever made. The venues look spectacular; the characters are perfectly parodied from greasers to chic rockers to hair-metal maniacs, and tune-wise, everything from '70s rawk to today's most choice tracks are on tap.

In search of the game's roots, I sought out the game's associate producer Ted Lange for the inside scoop on how it began and where it's headed...

interview

Ted Lange, Associate Producer, Guitar Hero II

Play: Let's talk about the beginning, when Guitar Hero was just an idea. Who came up with the gameplay framework/model?
Ted: It's actually a pretty interesting story. There were about four of us who had a series of dreams where Jim Morrison would be talking to us in a desert, going into details about the direction of the game. It was both mind opening and uplifting, but besides his input there were a number of people – on both the RedOctane and Harmonix teams – involved in developing the concept of the game.

Alrighty then. I'm sure there must have been someone squealing about how it should be more pop or urban based...but it ended pure rock n roll (hence the success). Was it ever an issue?
We've been doing market research to see how a Guitar Hero: Spice Girls edition would be received. As for the first two releases, the concern with trying to fit a more pop- or urban-based song into the song list is their playability. Unfortunately, most songs that fall into either of those categories don't have guitar tracks that translate into something playable for the game.

As long as Scary Spice has the jiggle, you'll be fine. How different was it going after artists for Guitar Hero II as opposed to the original? Were you able to mold GH 2 better riding on the original game's success?
There was a little less explaining of what the game was about. Because of the successes of the original there was a lot less hesitation on the parts of the bands. Primus allowed us to use a master track; other bands came to us looking to get into the game.

Any interesting stories to share like Ozzie, Alice Cooper, KISS (that had to be fun)... How do rock guitarists feel about the game? Have like, Dave Navarro or Eddie Van Halen picked up a plastic ax and given you there opinion?
Dave Navarro came out to do a signing at the release in West Los Angeles. After the release he noted that it highlights musicianship and allows people to learn the hand-eye coordination used in actual guitar playing.

That's so rad. I just saw Panic Channel and they were epic. The character design is absolutely the coolest, especially GH II on 360. Who designed the rockers?
Harmonix has an art team that did the graphics, but as for most of the game, there were a lot of people that had input into the final design. And of course, Jim Morrison played a huge role.

The dude gets around. What about licensing the actual likeness of a band like say Rob Zombie or Motley Crüe? Not for the whole game but as selectable characters....too pricey? ...Here's my big idea...Gorillaz!
What if we had actual gorillas as selectable characters? Would that go over better than the Gorillaz? Just a thought.

Bah! Way to dodge Ted. You'll be getting a call from Noodle. Have you entertained taking the game to the next level and adding any sort of RPG elements where you can, say, upgrade your bus or take a plane, etc.? Maybe even control your character off stage making it somewhat a rock RPG...

We're constantly trying to find ways to improve the game and expanding upon the career mode would definitely be one area that'll get an upgrade for Guitar Hero III. We are thinking WOGH or World of Guitar Hero, a massively multiplayer guitar extravaganza.

That's really depressing. GH is such a personal experience. Just keep the single player real. What artists have you not been able to get that you absolutely want? Has anyone stuck up their nose ring because it's a video game? Let us know so we can boo them when they come to town!
There have been a couple of bands that were a little hesitant to get involved, especially with the original, but most have been very receptive to the idea of allowing their fans to rock out as they do.

How far will you go adding to the 360 version via Live before actually crafting a dedicated next-gen sequel? And have you pondered how you will take full advantage of the 360 and PS3 hardware? Will it be a distinctly richer game or more of the same only prettier?
We want to make sure we give 360 rockers as much content as possible. We're already planning on offering more content being available for download than any other game. As for the next version, it's too early to tell what will or won't make it into a next-generation sequel.

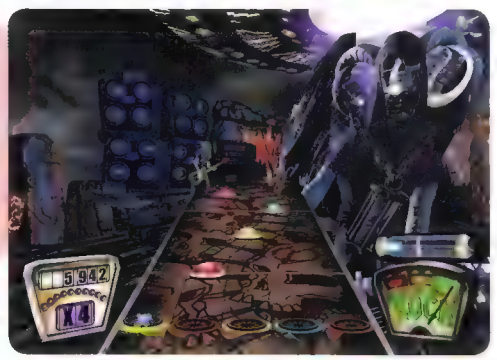
Now that you've seen what rock and video games can produce (minions!), have you given any thought to expanding your franchise via an action game? Imagining a Three Dirty Dwarves like game with guitars keeps me awake at night... We'll give you a cover...hell, we'll give you two!
The franchise is still in its infancy with there being only two releases so far. Once the franchise is more established, anything is possible. Johnny Napalm is more than deserving of his own spin off franchise.

A dude? Uh...no. Would you say that the GH faithful are comprised more of enthusiast gamers or more casual? What's the ratio?
It's a healthy dose of both. There's a very strong hard-core following, yet we receive countless letter from individuals sharing stories about the entire family getting involved.

What about girls? Are they rockin' the plastic?
We've had a couple of girls ask when Justin Timberlake was going to be making an appearance in the game, so there has to be at least a few playing the game. That's the great thing about this game is that it has gone beyond most demographics and expanded to what people never thought was possible. This is a game for music lovers more than game lovers.

Not the kind of girls I had in mind. So, you're the keepers of a bona-fide movement...a genre unto yourselves. Is the GH formula patented or are you waiting for the copycats to come nipping at your heels?
Impersonation is the highest form of flattery. If we do have copycats, it means we're doing something right.

If they do just pretend you're Ozzie and bite their heads off!
He is actually on stand by.



Anyone got a soul for sale?

"We've been doing market research to see how a Guitar Hero: Spice Girls edition would be received"

Viva Piñata

Gotta wack 'em all!

words Dave Halverson

Cross-over is a great thing, when it works, and this is one of those Rare occasions when everything falls into place. The by-product of video games merging with not pop-culture, but mainstream media—made all the more palatable by the HD era—has arrived, and if Viva Piñata is a sign of the times, then there's hope for humanity yet. Never before has "fun for the whole family" rung more true, thanks to some forward thinking and one of the most talented game developers in the world. Following closely behind the best looking and produced CGI TV series the world has ever known, in which a band of peppy Piñatas is parlayed into a kooky sitcom that transcends age—the release of Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360 was an important milestone. Not only did it show that Rare is back to their innovative ways, clearly settled into their new home, but it also marked a major milestone for Microsoft. Where the Xbox failed to do so, the Xbox360 has built a healthy, growing youth following, meaning that this go-round games like Voodoo Vince and Blinx (although it did sell nearly a quarter million copies) may not get swept under the ammo dump.

And for their next trick, Rare will resurrect one of action gaming's most beloved and revered duos, Banjo and Kazooie. How's that for E gaming Power! …One small victory at a time my friends. They still owe us Battletoads and Kameo sequels (no, I will never shut-up) but a stay of execution has definitely been granted.

interview

Creative director Gregg Mayles on all-things candy-filled and English speaking...

play: Admittedly even I—lover of all things Rare—had my doubts about this one. It was such a big departure…and piñatas? But alas Viva Piñata is strategy gaming evolved; a near perfect game deserving of all the spoils that go with a smash hit game/TV franchise. Did you ever have any doubt that people would react the way they have?

There are always concerns, but you have to stick firmly to your belief that you're doing the right thing. Of course you never know how well-founded this belief is until the game's finally released and the public decide! All the same, we'd much rather take these chances then turn out "safer" options, as so much of this business is about the challenge and pushing everyone's skills to the limit.

I mean after all you must know how badly your faithful want a Battletoads, Jet Force or Banjo sequel… the latter of which we're actually getting! Thank you! How's that going? Is there perhaps a TV series in Banjo and Kazooie's future?

I think a Banjo TV show would be great (well I would, I'm biased!), but I guess we'll have to wait and see whether the

It's hard to believe that this is player generated... VP is truly a milestone in interactive gaming.

Piñata show is considered a successful enough strategy before similar routes are taken with other IPs. Fingers crossed…

The difference between what we saw at E3 and what Viva actually turned out to be is staggering. Were all these layers of gameplay and character interactivity planned since day one or did the project evolve as you went along?
VP is a game where the sum of all its many parts makes it what it is, so when any of those parts are missing, there's going to be a knock-on effect. We couldn't work on it one level at a time, as there are no levels as such. This meant that only towards the end, when all of the parts fell into place and worked correctly, did it really resemble the game we wanted it to be. So it was always going to be difficult to offer a truly representative "work in progress" version of a game like VP.
No game can be designed 100% on paper and remain exactly the same throughout development, but as everything in the VP world co-exists we had to plan out as much as possible beforehand. So yes, most of the core gameplay and interactivity was planned, but there were also elements changed during development when the original ideas didn't work as well as hoped, and tweaks made that hadn't originally been considered.

The TV series is great. If you were to craft a sequel now that Viva is officially a killer app, would you consider an action game (be great to go surfing as Franklin) or would you be more apt to continue with the gardening/evolution theme?
I think we would consider anything that we thought would add to the Viva Piñata IP. Creating a game that becomes a franchise brings its own set of issues, the biggest of which is ensuring that the IP is not compromised by irrelevant or poorly received games. One bad game will be remembered for a long time and can do a lot of damage to the IP.

It's quite a feat—scoring a hit with your first TV property. How did the idea for Viva Piñata come about? Were you guys just aching to do something new?
The basic "garden with animals and trading" game template had existed for years in one form or another, and although the final game still sticks to those core principles, the whole thing really took on a new personality when our concept artist hit on the idea of making it stand out by using piñata animals. And the unique visuals no doubt helped 4Kids greenlight the Viva Piñata TV series when Microsoft later approached them with the idea.
As for needing to do something new, as a designer I'm a firm believer that you only develop by trying new things, and that a good games designer should be able to design games in pretty much any genre. I think the whole team learnt a lot by trying something radically different, and I personally would welcome this challenge again.

"No game can be designed 100% on paper and remain exactly the same throughout development..."

It also seems like Viva was developed relatively quickly, especially given your "it's done when it's done" high standard of quality. Is the fastest you've ever made a 3D game?
The game in its final form was only announced in March '06, but had actually started way back in 2002. For around a year the prototype team only consisted of three people, then it went up to 10 or so for another year. Only in the last 12-18 months did we scale up to around 50 people. So it was a slow start and a fast finish!

So there were many factors involved…
The way in which we developed VP was different to many of our games in the past, but we needed to prove that the concept worked before heavily committing our resources to it. The team had a very broad mix of experience; some had worked on many games, whereas for others it was their first project. I think this mix worked very well.

What did you find was the biggest challenge in terms of giving the player such freedom of choice?
Trying to imagine all the possibilities then accounting for them, making sure everything worked, and balancing the game. Hitting exactly the right balance was crucial; nothing would have worked if we'd put a foot wrong there.

Shouldn't Piñatas be afraid of being recruited to be beaten at a party? Not only is it the highest honor in Viva, but the Piñatas return. Is this like Piñata reincarnation? How did that whole process come about?
Everyone knows that Piñatas get smashed to pieces with a stick at a party, but you'd get pretty annoyed if your prize Piñata never returned! It was important that we had a mechanism which allowed the player to get their animals back, so this was the result. Making the game satisfying rather than frustrating was deemed more important than trying to cling to a sense of realism. It was never going to be the most grittily realistic game anyway…

As much as I love the game I would really relish the opportunity to breed nothing but sour evil Piñatas in a graveyard or gothic setting. Was such a thing ever considered or should I seek therapy?
We were surprised that so many people wanted to do this. We assumed that the player would want to be rid of the Sours as soon as possible, but I guess there are some people out there who'd delight in breeding a garden full of trouble and then passing them onto their friends. Maybe we should consider this for the Mature rated version?

VIVA TV

With fresh new episodes airing and merchandise in the offing it looks like our Piñata pals are going to be around for a good long time. The Play Piñata pet has the environment new Piñatas as Forrest Piñata, Anime Piñata, and Ninja Piñata.

Have you had a hand in or had a look at the impending toy line yet? Are they great? Anything you can reveal?
The guys doing the toys have had some great ideas, so all we (thankfully) need to do is review what they come up with to ensure everything is relevant and looks correct.

So, thus far you've given us Kameo and Viva Piñata—two of the finest games ever created in their respective genres—and are working on God's gift to platforming sequels. Can we get any inkling of what lies ahead? IP or sequel? Can you say? C'mon—you know you can!
Such praise, but it's not going to win you anything! Banjo's return is shaping up to be something really special and we look forward to the day that we can unveil it.
If we were to work on all the games that people want to see (e.g. Battletoads, Jet Force Gemini, Blast Corps and Killer Instinct sequels), it would leave us no time to try new IP. I think the key is in finding the right balance – not forgetting your past but at the same time always looking to the future.

Art: Dany Orizio

Best-of SEGA Part 1

compiled by Dave Halverson

Slow down and flicker now relics of the past, we marveled at the near-arcade quality of our 16-bit system. Parallax scrolling and arcade-quality tunes gobbling up precious memory from the work-horse Z80. It was a magical time. Original titles sprung from every corner of the Earth, some good, most bad, but the 16-bit wars were on and they would change our lives forever.

play Top 25 Genesis/Mega Drive

1. Gunstar Heroes
2. Phantasy Star II
3. Phantasy Star IV: The End of the Millennium
4. Earthworm Jim
5. Sonic 2
6. Sonic the Hedgehog
7. Streets of Rage 2
8. Landstalker
9. Castlevania Bloodlines
10. Herzog Zwei
11. Wonder Boy IV (Mega Drive Only)
12. Streets of Rage
13. Wonder Boy in Monster World
14. Strider
15. Contra Hard Corps
16. Shining Force
17. Ranger X
18. Revenge of Shinobi
19. Golden Axe
20. ToeJam & Earl
21. Langrisser II (Mega Drive only)
22. Shining in the Darkness
23. Shinobi III
24. Comix Zone
25. Out of this World

play Top 10 Sega CD

1. Snatcher
2. Sonic CD (import version)
3. Lunar Silver Star Story
4. Lunar Eternal Blue
5. Wonderdog
6. Flink
7. Popfulmail
8. EWJ SE
9. Silpheed
10. Keio Yu Gekitai

play Top 5 32X

1. Knuckles Chaotix
2. Kolibri
3. Temp
4. Space Harrier
5. Virtua Racing Dlx

Dave Halverson Top Ten

01. Gunstar Heroes
02. Earthworm Jim
03. Landstalker
04. Ranger X
05. Castlevania Bloodlines
06. Comix Zone
07. Wonder Boy IV
08. Shining in the Darkness
09. Dynamite Headdy
10. Boogerman

Brady Fiechter Top Ten

01. Sonic 2
02. Sonic the Hedgehog
03. Gunstar Heroes
04. Castlevania Bloodlines
05. Revenge of Shinobi
06. Strider
07. Golden Axe
08. Streets of Rage
09. Phantasy Star: End of the Millennium
10. Earthworm Jim

Mike Griffin Top Ten

01. Gunstar Heroes
02. Streets of Rage 2
03. Shining Force
04. Landstalker
05. Shining in the Darkness
06. Phantasy Star 2
07. Sonic 2
08. Phantasy Star: End of the Millennium
09. Contra Hard Corps
10. Streets of Rage

Greg Orlando Top Ten

01. Mutant League Football
02. ToeJam & Earl
03. Earthworm Jim
04. Sonic 2
05. Phantasy Star II
06. Streets of Rage 2
07. Mortal Kombat II
08. Street Fighter II: SCE
09. Gunstar Heroes
10. Battletoads

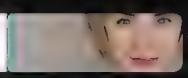
Nick Des Barres Top Ten

01. Phantasy Star: End of the Millennium
02. Phantasy Star II
03. Monster World IV
04. Gunstar Heroes
05. Ristar the Shooting Star
06. Landstalker
07. Contra Hard Corps
08. Herzog Zwei
09. Shining Force
10. Langrisser II

Casey Loe Top Ten

01. Phantasy Star II
02. Phantasy Star: End of the Millennium
03. Langrisser II
04. Monster World IV
05. Shining Force
06. Gunstar Heroes
07. Shadowrun
08. Herzog Zwei
09. Shinobi III
10. Contra Hard Corps

Heather Campbell Top Ten



01. Sonic 2
02. Out of This World
03. Ecco the Dolphin
04. Sonic the Hedgehog
05. ToeJam & Earl
06. Earthworm Jim
07. Outrun
08. Streets of Rage
09. Flashback
10. Golden Axe

Eric Patterson Top Ten

01. Herzog Zwei
02. Target Earth
03. Sonic the Hedgehog
04. Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse
05. Landstalker
06. Romance of the Three Kingdoms II
07. Monster World IV
08. Troubleshooter
09. Phantasy Star: End of the Millennium
10. Ghouls 'n' Ghosts

THE GIRLS ARE BACK...

DON'T MISS THE **DIGITAL ONLY** BONUS CONTENT!!!

DOWNLOAD NOW!!!

www.playmagazine.com

OR CALL
800-694-6506

Also available at newsstands everywhere!

Be sure to order these previous volumes to complete your collection.

They'll be gone soon!

play
Staff "Round-up"

Odin Sphere 014
Monster Madness 050
F.E.A.R. 061
Prince of Persia: Rival Swords 062
Atelier Iris 3 064
Rayman: Raving Rabbids 065
Coded Arms Contagion 066
Infernal 084

Reviews

May 2007

Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, sandbox
Now playing: Odin Sphere, Monster Madness, Hellboy, Castlevania Chronicles, Dawn of Mana
Fave pastime other than gaming: Shredding the suburban outback on my Goped Trail Ripper!

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

[redacted]

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando
Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Virtua Tennis, Lost In Blue II
Fave pastime other than gaming: Cat Juggling

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin
PC Editor

[redacted]

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

The play rating system

10. Perfect
9. Extraordinary
8. Great
7. Good
6. Decent
5. Average
4. Below average
3. Poor
2. Bad
1. Terrible

Nick Des Barres
Japan Editor

[redacted]

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe
Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, humming-bird simulators
Now playing: iDOLM@STER, Oblivion SI...
Fave pastime other than gaming: Talking about playing games.

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson
Contributing Editor

[redacted]

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell
Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: PoP, Naruto **Fave pastime other than gaming:** Comparing gourmet cheeseburger restaurants in LA.

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs
Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Zelda, Resistance, RR7
Fave pastime other than gaming:

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Monster Madness

Rise from your grave! . . .Er, but not so fast!

words Dave Halverson

I discovered and began my crusade (phoning publishers to find it a US home) for Monster Madness back in the summer of 2005, as the first screen shots began to emerge out of the UK, and I've been following it ever since. Why the fascination with what boils down to a traditional 1-4 player run 'n' gun with Xbox 360 graphics and physics? ...File this one under "more of the same only waaay better." I'm a sucker for overhead shooters, and Monster Madness represents a giant leap forward for a genre that's been left for dead as developers wrestle with artificial complexity to earn "next-gen" status—a term that can't go away soon enough. Things got dicey with Monster Madness mere months before its US debut (see my March issue preview), however (for once), all of my concerns have been addressed, and then some. Initially limited to the first few areas, I'm overjoyed with what I *didn't* know lurked beneath the surface of this cheeky monster fest. Monster Madness sheds its

well-worn shooter skin while you're still in the game's first area, suburbia (zombies ate your neighbors, so you're battling towards the source of the outbreak), and never looks back.

Jesse James has got nothing on Larry, the game's Paul Teutul Sr.-looking resident handy man. When he's not creating homemade weapons/contraptions out of the junk you bring him, he's scouting ahead in his beastly black RV, supercharging swan boats, building assault buggies, and even mechs (props to the VW mech are due) to help you overcome the game's increasingly more twisted (and intelligent) zombie hordes. With each passing sub level, new species arise (complete with their own proem) requiring frequent changes in strategy. Token zombies be damned; this is as motley a crew of undead psychopaths I've ever seen. Zombie Bikers, various imps, and all manner of sociopaths are deftly mangled and so happy to see you…for devouring purposes of course. Such a foul brigade of the undead has never been assembled and it never stops growing. Collecting junk for Larry is your only hope for success (making exploration mandatory), along with knowing thyn enemy. All the staples of a great shooter are here as a catalyst for a much broader and longer game than I'd imagined. I just love being right (even though I predict this game gets hammered).

"Did I mention that it's drop-dead gorgeous? True 360 visuals are a thing of beauty; ports be damned!"

The characters manage some decent one-liners—especially Jennifer: "Ugly things don't deserve to live".

Run 'n' gun soon makes way to more varied missions where you might find yourself enchanting golden zombies Moonwalker-style (bust a groove) to further your assault, or piloting a homemade mech through piles of cars in search of key RV parts; you even become a zombie yourself with projectile vomit, zombie dance moves; the works. The bosses follow suit, beginning as simple pattern- based super freaks before blossoming into cause and effect beasties that must be lured or chased. I guess it's safe to say that Monster Madness is truly the evolution of the old-school top-down shooter…an amalgam of games like Zombies Ate My Neighbors and Loaded with shades of Baldur's Gate on the side. And none too soon: If I see another first-person shooter or prompt-filled movie game I'm going to dial 911. Did I mention that it's drop-dead gorgeous too? True 360 visuals are a thing of beauty; ports be damned!

Just as Odin Sphere is fresh and new due to its traditional 2D roots, so is Monster Madness in its traditional shooter guise. These super-charged classics are akin to dropping a HEMI into an AMC Gremlin with

fire-breathing headers and Funny car tires and getting Rat Fink to drive (Prius—it's what's for dinner!).

The game isn't without issues, but they are minor in the scheme of things. The collision is understandably a bit rough—has to be given the complexity and destructibility of each world—and certain vehicles handle better than others (buggies and ATVs take some getting used to). But rough edges aside, Artificial has buttoned up the game as well as can be expected given the amount of interactive objects they've peppered throughout the game. You'll see what I mean when you enter the Toy Store in the mall and take on Mr. Huggles. For the addition of a single-player chase cam, I am forever in their debt; the balance/difficulty issues have been rectified (single players may want to play on easy "Childs Play" their first time through, while 2-player games are more suited to "Thriller" difficulty) and the interface and cut scenes are comic bliss, just like the characters they represent. Anyone surprised I chose Jennifer? I thought not. Carrie's way cool too… They all are, but you haven't lived until you've seen Jennifer in springy shoes.

Monster Madness — score **9.0**

+	A wonderfully modernized throwback filled with 360 accoutrements and cool gameplay twists. Also a lot longer than I expected, but never repetitious.
–	Music ranges for good to not-so; collision can get pretty funky. Jumping with the analog stick a little dicey.

System(s)	Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Artificial Studios
Publisher	Southpeak Interactive
Online/Multi	Online 1-16 player
ESRB Rating	T
Available	May 15

"Token zombies be damned; this is as motley a crew of undead psychopaths I've ever seen."

F.E.A.R.

Blasting through the darkness...

words Brady Fiechter

I like games with lots of "oh sh*t" moments, which is why I like F.E.A.R. so much. Its enemy encounters occur so suddenly and with such unpredictability, I don't feel like I'm walking into a scripted shooting gallery as much as a wild shootout with real threats. Glass shatters, plaster falls apart, smoke fills the air, obscuring the target as I get even more worked up trying to find the mark as the enemy darts about with an unparalleled level of intelligence. This game's intense.

I also like F.E.A.R. for its excellent pacing, knowing when to calm down the chaos and provide stretches of moody exploration and building tension. Like Condemned before it, Monolith has built a compelling real-world space of darkness and abandonment, making you feel on edge even when the action sits in the background.

There's a superb craft to many elements in F.E.A.R, but that doesn't mean every step is as engaging as the last. Midway through the campaign, you start to feel like you've been introduced to too much of the same industrial setting and enemy setup, impatiently waiting for the next shot of adrenaline that doesn't feel so much like the one before it. When monotonously winding office building gives way to parking structures and run-down projects, the game gets back to firing on all cylinders. The enemy variety never gets to where you might want it, but F.E.A.R's so good at raw intensity within the action that it doesn't really matter as much as it might in another FPS.

While the game could have still been mighty impressive running on a fairly straightforward gameplay structure, the slow-motion hook does add a great deal of charge and strategy to the action. It doesn't come off at all as a gimmick, providing an important layer that completes the package. Mix in the effective horror angle and you've got reason why some people have called F.E.A.R. one of the best first-person shooters out there—certainly one of the more dynamic and unique.

At least it was a couple years ago, when the game debuted on PC. It's tempting to fault the presentation on PS3, which feels underutilized and in some ways inferior to the Xbox 360. The game feels dated more than it should, and the fact that it's a port that could have been enhanced doesn't feel as forgivable for the new hardware it resides on. But when so much is this good, a few hazards along the way don't ruin the hugely entertaining ride.

"Like Condemned before it, Monolith has built a compelling real-world space of darkness and abandonment."

Every shootout leaves your heart pumping...

F.E.A.R. score **8.0**

+	Great AI, keen pacing, moody visuals
–	Technology isn't what you might want on PS3

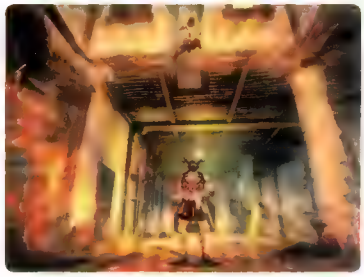
System(s)	PS3
Developer	Day 1 Studios/Monolith
Publisher	Sierra
Online/Multi	1-16
ESRB Rating	M
Available	April

The Prince of Persia *Rival Swords*

Please fasten your wrist strap...

words Heather Campbell

Even though it's a port, Rival Swords is one of the best looking games available for the Wii.



I can't decide if I *love* the Wii-mote or am merely indifferent to it. Sometimes, I'll see a whole untapped world of possibilities in the little white wand. This potential is especially clear when a game is developed with the Wii in mind. On cross-platform games however, the Wii-mote doesn't feel that novel. Once you've adjusted to the motion sensitivity, it registers in your brain just like any other controller. And on a game like The Prince of Persia: Rival Swords (based on 2005's The Two Thrones), what I'm really reviewing is How The Game Works On The Wii. You know that the game looks a little dated, and you know there are small graphical glitches throughout. You may even know the story by now.

Taking place after The Warrior Within, Rival Swords is about The Prince of Persia's struggle against his darker self. After saving the Empress of Fate, the Prince returns to Babylon to discover that the evil Vizier is still alive. What's worse, the villain now has enough power to defeat almost any adversary. Racked with doubt and fueled by animosity, the Prince has to battle himself even as he's attempting to save Babylon.

> "Despite the sometimes clumsy combat, Rival Swords is engaging, addictive and enjoyable."

The story is fine. What you want to know is does the Wii-mote make the game more fun?

There are times when the game works remarkably on the Wii. Whipping your daggertail, for example, is intuitive and satisfying. Sword and dagger combat, on the other hand, is frustratingly messy. Stabbing motions don't translate as well to the Wii-mote as do the broad sweeps of a whip. Thankfully, the rest of the Prince's acrobatic actions are mapped to the buttons on both the nunchuck and the Wii-mote proper, so leaping from ledge to ledge is certain and precise.

Despite the sometimes clumsy combat, Rival Swords is engaging, addictive and enjoyable. The puzzles aren't that difficult, and the rush at the end of a successfully navigated room drives you into the next set-piece. Not to mention, watching the Prince move is fun. Racing up a wall with rabbit feet never gets old. I could run around on walls for days, just for the pleasure of doing so.

In the end, this is Prince of Persia's greatest strength. The game is just fun to play, and the story is satisfying pulp. The God of War-esque daggertail is brutish ballet; I wish there was a whole whip-combat game coming out for the Wii. Maybe we'll see something out of Konami that satisfies this.

The Prince of Persia Rival Swords — score **8.5**

\+ A fun game on a system that needs more mature action titles.

\- Sword combat is cluttered and sloppy.

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher	Ubisoft
Online/Multi	NA
Available	April 2007
ESRB Rating	T

Atelier Iris 3 Grand Phantasm

A great recipe that's missing a few key ingredients

words Casey Loe

Gust experimented with a variety of different genres before achieving their greatest success with Atelier Iris, the series that brought a conventional RPG structure to their trademark mix of colorful 2D visuals, quirky battle systems, and deep item-creation mechanics. Grand Phantasm finds Gust in an experimental mood once again, and while it includes a number of significant upgrades, its unconventional structure will disappoint fans who expect another globe-trotting RPG adventure.

You control the team of warrior Edge and alchemist Iris, foster siblings who pay the rent by working for the Raider Guild in the city of Zey Meruze. (Strangely, the Iris of Grand Phantasm has no apparent connection to the Irises of the previous two titles.) Everyone lives peacefully in Zey Meruze, but there's plenty of adventure to be found in five mysterious "Alterworlds" that can be entered through a series of dimensional rifts.

While the battle and alchemy systems will look familiar to Atelier Iris veterans, each has been revised for the better. The battle system's burst mode mechanic reverses the usual hoard-your-resources thinking of RPG battles by encouraging you to use flashy and powerful special attacks to trigger a burst of energy that dramatically boosts your heroes' power and replenishes most of the lost skill points. The alchemy system has been refined and simplified, and is ultimately more satisfying because of it. Another major upgrade is the ability to see enemies on the battlefield, and even kill them outright with a single swing of your blade if they're lower level than you.

The Alterworlds are vast and beautiful dungeons with bright hand-drawn graphics and loads of visual variety—a drastic improvement over the repetitive dungeon designs in past Atelier Iris games. The Atelier series has always boasted fantastic soundtracks, but composer Ken Nakagawa has outdone himself with Grand Phantasm. His unique and upbeat score is an early contender for soundtrack of the year.

If all of these upgrades were complimenting a long and riveting quest, then Grand Phantasm would be the breakout hit that Atelier Iris fans have been waiting for. Unfortunately, Zey Meruze and the five Alterworlds compose the entirety of Grand Phantasm's world, and most of your missions do nothing to advance the game's storyline. Instead of exploring or pursuing major plot points, you'll spend the majority of your time revisiting familiar Alterworlds to complete simple fetch or kill quests. The structure of Grand Phantasm is reminiscent of hub-and-dungeon games like the Mystery Dungeon series, and the change feels like a step backwards after Atelier Iris 2's world-spanning adventure.

Grand Phantasm is capable of scratching that RPG itch with its enjoyable Alterworlds, innovative battle system, and exceptional soundtrack, but its thin quest won't linger in your memories for long. Hopefully next time Gust can marry a substantial adventure and engrossing storyline with this level of production values.

Once again, the 2D graphics are outstanding.

Atelier Iris 3 Grand Phantasm	Score 7.5
+	Refined systems, improved graphics, great soundtrack
–	Short on characters and areas, too humble in scale
System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Gust
Publisher	NIS America
Online/Multi	NA
Available	May
ESRB Rating	T

Rayman Raving Rabbids

score 9.0

Take the plunge...er

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	Xbox 360	Multi	NA
Developer	Ubisoft Montpelier	Available	Now
Publisher	Ubisoft	ESRB Rating	Teen

I know we all love our Wiis but having spent more time incarcerated with Rayman than I care to admit—being the one and only mini-game bonanza in which I partake—Raving Rabbids is just plain better with a standard controller. Admittedly, I may be partially swayed by the HD graphics, a pair of new mini-games, and lightning-fast load times, but even though the game remains the same I found the localized familiarity of my 360 buttons slightly more appealing than the Wiimote and Nunchuk. Not to wee on the Wii's parade (the game had a long exclusive run after all), but now that the 360 game is out, even though it's a port, the Wii's screen resolution and lack of a controller option sticks out like a mouth full of saucy worms. I still can't figure out why developers aren't offering standard control options given how cool the Wii pad is. I get that Nintendo wants everyone to experience the hook on which they've bet the farm but isn't freedom of choice what it's all about? In either case, just do your part and keep these bunnies from multiplying.

"Not to wee on the Wii's parade, but now that the 360 game is out..."

No animals were harmed in the creation of this game. Ubisoft left that to us.

Meet The Robinson's

score 6.5

America's most user friendly family

words Dave Halverson

System(s)	PS2, Xbox 360, GameCube, Wii, PC	Multi	NA
Developer	Avalanche	Available	Now
Publisher	Disney Interactive	ESRB Rating	E

By-the-numbers movie, meet your by-the-numbers game. It's hard to believe that MTR is from Avalanche, home of the engaging Tak franchise. At least MTR gets a solid engine out of the deal, and with time (and much patience) the gameplay does deliver...the problem is that kids don't like to wait (our resident kid tester balked big time). A play on the film, Bowler Hat Guy makes off with the time machine due to Wilbur's carelessness and so, of course, he's got to get it back. Adventuring we go! ...But not so fast. Wilbur has to take out the garbage first, so the in-game tutorial can bash you over the head with prompts. That pillar that's so obviously meant to be pushed—well, they feel the need to tell you to push it, along with how, followed by flashing hands all over it and a graphic at the bottom of the screen... Gee, I guess you should push that. And so it goes...and goes. Taking out the trash, I kid you not: 30 minutes of mundane pre-scripted yawn inducing tedium. They even mark where to go on the map. You're essentially running pre scripted errands. The sad thing is that there's a decent game in here; if only the producers didn't feel the need to play it for you. It's a bit on the stiff side and I detest auto-jumping, but the shooting mechanics are good to go, and there's some nice adventuring to be had... Then again the best version is of course on 360 and they've done little besides crank the resolution and a few textures to give us our money's worth. Some normal mapping at the very east would have been nice. I say make it pick-up-and-play simple for kids or a bona fide action adventure for teen and up. This is neither. I smell focus groups and developer interference all over this one.

The lights are on...

Coded Arms Contagion

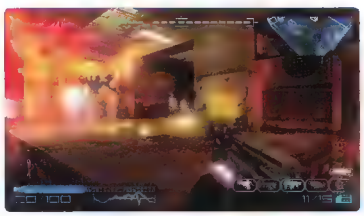
Illness: nasty virus. Prescribed cure: ample amounts of hot lead

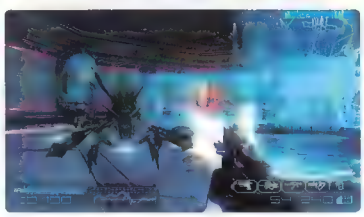
words Eric L. Patterson

Ambition is always a quality to be admired, be it in a person, a product, or a video game. Even though my experience with the original Coded Arms was limited, it doesn't take long to see that Coded Arms: Contagion was an ambitious project, both in comparison to the previous title, and as far as PSP games go.

Unlike its predecessor, Contagion is a fully crafted world, with a specific protagonist, a well-integrated storyline, and stages that have been meticulously crafted instead of being randomly generated on the fly. The virtual world the game unfolds in is once again a military simulation, but this time you play as a soldier named Grant who must survive and stop the viral outbreak that has corrupted the computer program. Environments are great, both in design and style, and the game's visuals–particularly the sometimes insane texture detail–often reminded me of just how much power my little PSP can indeed pump out.

Combined with the visuals are small touches that add to the sense of being in a simulated battlefield. You can switch your visor to a Matrix-style viewpoint, where instead of seeing your surroundings as they seem, you see the green-tinted inner workings of the code used to build them. Though you can only use this view for a short time due to its battery life, this allows you to look through walls, floors, or obstacles blocking your path in order to help figure out where next to go or what foes may be lying in wait just around the corner. Contagion also features an interesting "hacking" system, where via a challenging number puzzle you'll unlock doors, obtain hidden items, or reprogram enemy weapons to give you cover fire.



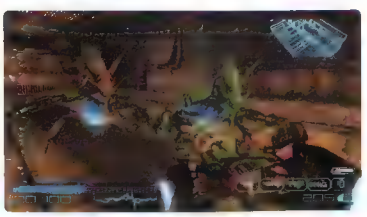


"Unlike its predecessor, Contagion is a fully crafted world..."

While most of Contagion's pieces come together quite nicely–including control, which works surprisingly well once you've gone into the options and selected the second control scheme–one factor falls far short of the game's otherwise respectable level of quality. Enemy A.I. is, to put it bluntly, utterly terrible. Non-boss enemies all swear by one strategic plan: run straight at you, stop about three feet away, and stand there shooting until you've killed them. Bosses are a bit smarter, as they choose instead to stand farther back from you as they're employing said means of attack. The weapon selection in the game is fabulous, with a wide assortment of gun and grenade types, each of which can be upgraded and enhanced in numerous ways; but when almost no strategy is required in the disposing of your foes, there's almost no reason at all to switch one out for another unless you're out of ammo.

Coded Arms: Contagion's fumble in regards to enemy A.I. really is a disappointment, but doesn't completely bring the game down. If you can appreciate old-school first person shooters, where enemies weren't expected to have the best survival instincts, then the single player mode is still worth the time it takes to play through it. There's also a number of multiplayer modes, so if single player ends up just not being your thing, you can put all of those lovely weapons to good use as you frag up to seven other players locally or over the internet.

Behold Among the best looking PSP FPS's to date



Coded Arms: Contagion — score

I didn't think the PSP could pull of proper FPS controls; I was wrong.

An enemy army that lost all will to live, and now only survives in hopes of being gunned down.

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Creat Studios
Publisher	Konami
Online/Multi	1-8 Players Local/Online
Available	May 2007
ESRB Rating	Teen

Naruto
Ninja Council 3

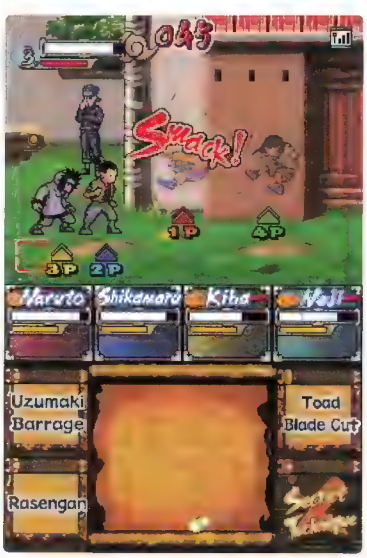
School is now in session

words Heather Campbell

Naruto is such a gigantic franchise that it's hard to keep up with all the games being released. There are RPGs, platformers, card battles, VS. fighters ... if you enjoy Naruto, chances are there's some type of Naruto game out there that you'd relish.

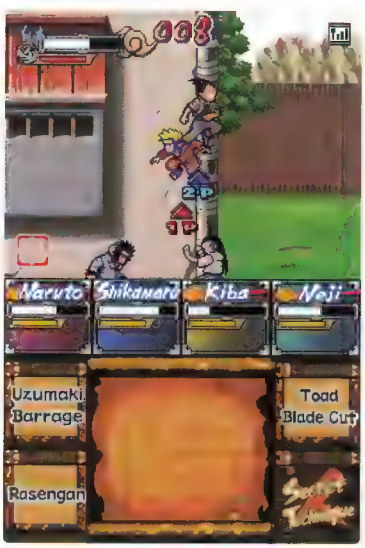
Naruto: Ninja Council 3 is the sequel to the Game Boy Advance series, and uses similar sprites and animations. Expanding on the roster, Ninja Council now has 27 different characters, and over 60 missions. Like every Naruto game, the title drips with fan-service, and the dubbing on the little cart is as good as what you'll find on the Cartoon Network.

Timed to coincide with the American release of the show, Ninja Council takes place after the Chuunin exams. Fan darlings like Gaara and Rock Lee are obviously available, as well as certain members of Akatsuki. With its large roster of fighters to choose from, Ninja Council plays up on the most immediate charm of Naruto: with so many different personalities, everyone has a favorite character.



"Like every Naruto game, the title drips with fan-service..."

Be sure to have your stylus at the ready...



The more than 50 missions are like small Smash Brothers rounds, as these kid-ninjas leap incredible distances to bludgeon each other. You can dash out combat with the stylus, or blow into the microphone to use special attacks. Furthermore, the Jutsus for each character are interchangeable, so launching Naruto into a Sasuke special is not only possible, it's encouraged!

Naruto: Ninja Council 3	
System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	TOMY
Publisher	TOMY
Online/Multi	NA
Available	May 2007

Etrian Odyssey

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	Atlus	Available	May 30, 2007
Publisher	Atlus	ESRB Rating	Teen

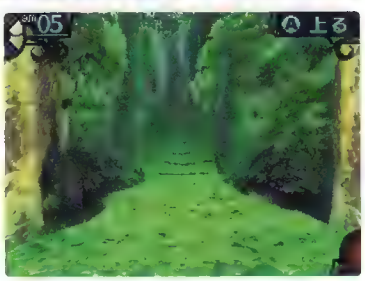
Etrian Odyssey reminds me of old Sierra adventure games. See kids, before automatic mapping, we used to draw our maps on paper. In the days before the Internet, going on a virtual adventure required personal attention to detail. There were no FAQs, and few strategy guides. If you wanted to know where the entrance to that cave was, you'd better have drawn yourself a grid and some directions.

Atlus seeks to rekindle that feeling of accountability with this 3-D, first-person dungeon (forest) adventure. Crafting a team of familiar fantasy archetypes, you set out with your party into the dangerous and forbidding Yggdrasil Labyrinth to find fame and fortune in its confusing depths. The lower screen is relegated to map-making, and there are a variety of icons to help make your diagram as detailed as possible. Random encounters with monsters are standard turn-based RPG stuff, but there's something very rewarding in the meat-and-potatoes simplicity of Etrian Odyssey. Indeed, there's a profound sense of satisfaction when you work your way through a dungeon and take a moment to look at your well-crafted map. I wish I could use the Game-Boy Printer and collect all of them when I'm done.

Oh well, that's what the Internet is for.

Heather Campbell

"...there's something very rewarding in the meat-and-potatoes simplicity of Etrian Odyssey."



Brooktown High

System(s)	PSP	Multi	1 Player
Developer	Backbone Entertainment	Available	May 2007
Publisher	Konami	ESRB Rating	Teen

Not even two months after moving here from Ohio, and I'm inviting my eccentric goth girlfriend back to my room for a little one-on-one make out action. Then there's the new-age hippie chick who I somehow found myself also dating, the cute nerdy girl with glasses from whom I stole a kiss, and the pink-haired RPG dork that has her eye on my epic gear. A typical day in the rock and roll lifestyle of a video game reviewer? Don't I wish–it's the wacky high-jinx of Brooktown High, Konami's new PSP dating sim. Unlike their legendary Japanese series Tokimeki Memorial, Brooktown is tailored more toward an American audience, playing off of the absurd humor and ridiculous situations one could get themselves into when given the opportunity to hit on each and every character in the game.

Once you've created your avatar (guy or gal) and tailored their personality by answering a series of questions, it's off to school where you have to keep your parents happy by getting good grades and not flunking out, attract attention by putting together the perfect mix of fashion and accessories, and make time for an after-school club or part time job. The real meat of the game is the relationship building you'll be doing with your classmates; you can pick that special someone to romance, or you can do like I'm doing and be a guilt-free gigolo. I just hope there's no such thing as virtual karma, because if there is, I'm screwed.

Eric L. Patterson

Nick Des Barres

Dai Kobama

Gundam Musou

Finally, a new candidate for best Gundam game of all time.

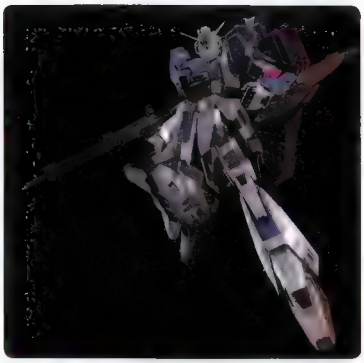
words Nick Des Barres

When it comes to video games, Mobile Suit Gundam may very well be the worst-treated license in history. Sure, there have been some questionable Star Wars titles... but there was also Knights of the Old Republic. Gundam never quite got anything comparable, and its best game remained Gihren's Greed, a strategy game originally released on Saturn, for years. Last year's mind-numbingly average Crossfire, also on PLAYSTATION 3, certainly did little to help.

And so, as a serious Gundam aficionado, it gives me great pleasure to tell you that Gundam Musou is *absolutely fantastic*. As a Gundam title, it immediately becomes the frontrunner for best game to ever bear the name. I would even go as far as to recommend it to the non-fan, which is something I honestly cannot say about any other Gundam game ever released. While there is little doubt a huge chunk of the enjoyment this game provides would be entirely lost on someone not fairly well-versed in the mythos, its core gameplay experience is at least as solid as any game in the series on which it is based, Koei's Musou/Dynasty Warriors.

Bandai's opening up of the Gundam license to non-internal teams (both Capcom and Namco have recently delivered Gundam games, and the upcoming Operation Troy on Xbox 360 is by developer Dimps) has finally given it room to shine, and Koei's Omega-Force has done a wonderful job here. If you're conversant with the developer's Dynasty Warrior games, you probably know what to expect: On the surface the game is a button-mashing slash-fest, but its true depth–not immediately apparent–comes from strategic elements. The action in Musou games is really just cover for a gigantic RTS, where

"And so, as a serious Gundam aficionado, it gives me great pleasure to tell you that Gundam Musou is absolutely fantastic."



the protection of allies, securing of territory, and accomplishment of specific goals is paramount.

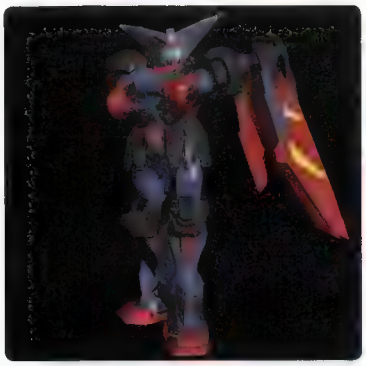
Even so, the bread-and-butter is still tap-tap combo strings, repeated ad nauseam. Like any Musou game, one always has to keep the overall state of the battle in mind (literally hundreds of enemies and allies constantly wage war around you), but this is always bracketed by: 1.) Unleashing visually spectacular combos over and over, 2.) Charging your "Musou Gauge", and 3.) Using it to deliver a massive special attack, rinsing, and repeating. It may sound insufferably tedious...if it wasn't so much damn fun. With literally dozens of Musou games under their belt now, Omega-Force definitely understand how to make a game's core experience feel good to play, and they succeed at something intangible where similar games like Ninety-Nine Nights fail.

"Gundam Musou's greatest strength is its staggering replayability: The Official Modes alone should last you a good ten hours, and the real meat–Original–easily adds another forty to fifty. "

Gundam Musou takes the tried-and-true series game model and does it one better, by finally addressing one of the flaws that has plagued the series for years: Getting around the massive maps quickly. Your mobile suits can boost-dash at lightning speed all over the map–a feature sure to be the envy of ancient Chinese generals everywhere–making getting to the other side of an area to aid an ally in distress much simpler. This greatly increases the pace of the game, making it crispier and more frenetic. And what says frenetic like 100 Zaku-IIs peppered all over the screen? Whereas PS2 Musous might have maxed out at a couple dozen foes, the PS3 iteration literally spews out hundreds. Sure, most of them just stand there, but they sure do blow up good.

But hey, that's just the meat. What about the *gravy,* right? Praise be to the gods above: Gundam Musou is positively swimming in it. The character and mobile suit lineup is a Gundam fan's wet fever dream, but let's start with the missions. Broken up into "Official" and "Original" modes, each mission follows a single character/mobile suit combination for a *lengthy* campaign that either closely follows the original plot (Official) or mixes timelines and characters willy-nilly (Original). Official–consisting of canon campaigns for Amuro Ray, Char Aznable, Kamille Bidan, Paptimus Scirocco, Haman Karn and Judau Ashta–is quite nice, with all your favorite key moments from the First, Z and ZZ series reproduced by the original voice actors. Hey, that's great, right? They even throw in people like Anavel Gato from F91 and Johnny Ridden from Mobile Suit Variations into the Battle of A Baoa Qu. Groovy.

Official Mode alone would have sold me on the game...but Original is where



it gets *hot*, baby. Where it gets CRAZY. Maybe you'd like to see Emma Sheen chew Loran Cehack out, or Puru imitate Domon Kasshu's classic "Come forth, Gundam!" pose to summon her AMX-004 Qubeley Mk II, or perhaps just enjoy the simple thrill of seeing Char and Amuro fight back-to-back, as allies. Yes, Original Mode, which has campaigns for–deep breath–everyone from Original Mode, as well as Domon Kasshu, Master Asia, Heero Yuy, Milliardo Peacecraft, Loran Cehack, Emma Sheen, Jerid Mesa, Elpeo Puru, Puru Two, and Roux Louka, all in their respective mobile suits, will blow your mind to smithereens.

Put simply, it's Gundam All-Stars, radically mixing characters together into fantasy battles and situations that even the most crazed Gundam zealot could never have imagined. No parallel in Western fandom really exists, but it's kind of like being able to play a mission in which Captains Kirk, Picard, Janeway, Sisko and Archer all serve together. Portrayed by their original actors. And lasting for forty hours. Gundam Musou's greatest strength is its *staggering* replayability: The Official Modes

This is the Gundam game you've been waiting for

alone should last you a good ten hours, and the real meat–Original–easily adds another forty to fifty...to say nothing of the multiplayer options. The amount of content is almost embarrassing, and it's a miracle Omega-Force was able to get the game out as fast as they did.

With that said, some areas of Gundam Musou *do* feel a little rushed, particularly with regards to presentation. Everything runs at a brisk 60fps and rarely if ever slows down, even when the screen is cluttered with thousands of mobile suit fragments, but environments are sparse and textures bland. Thankfully, the game does look very nice when lots of stuff is exploding on screen...and that's pretty much always. The music is also a nice touch: Instead of generic game music, almost every track is from original Gundam television series. The BGM may not always match up with the manic action onscreen, but nothing beats nostalgia.

There is a vocal minority in Japan who spurn Gundam Musou, saying its wild acrobatics and blinding speed have less to do with staid, stately Gundam than they do with mindless action games. They may have a point–Amuro destroys more Zaku IIs in the very first mission than were probably ever manufactured during the entire One Year War–but I say screw 'em. Gundam Musou is a fantasy, a look at the Gundam world we've never seen before, and I'm going to say it's brilliant. Although it seems fairly obvious it'll get an American release eventually, never forget your shiny new PS3 can play Japanese games with no modification. Gundam Musou is a Gundam fan's dream come true, and the first must-have original PLAYSTATION 3 title. What better game to introduce your system to imports with?

Gundam Musou score **8.5**

\+ Massive amount of content, ultimate fan service for all time

\- Repetitive gameplay, occasionally bland graphics

System(s)	PLAYSTATION 3
Developer	Omega-Force
Publisher	Bandai Namco
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

iDOLM@STER

Jailbait goes next-gen

words Casey Loe

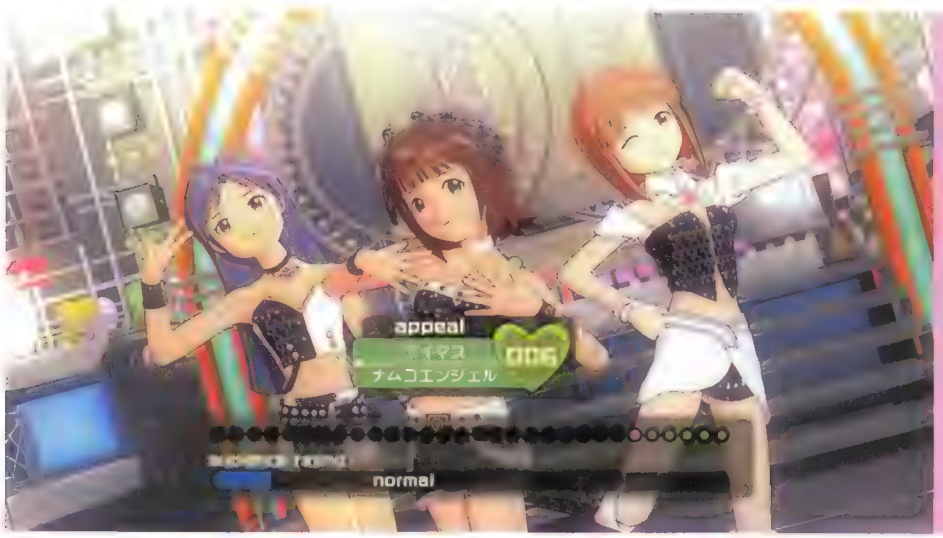
iDOLM@STER serves as the *Viva Piñata* of Japan, a game that is so crazily out of step with the rest of the platform's library that its natural weirdness doubles when you find it shelved between Gears of War and Lost Planet. The transition from space marine to pop idol-producer is jarring, but the experience is as engrossing as it is unique.

iDOLM@STER casts you as a producer charged with taking your company's stable of idols to the top of the charts in Japan's famously shallow pop music business. Each of the ten girls has a one-year career (a sad commentary on the actual career spans of such creatures), giving you 52 game weeks you may spend escorting your idol to lessons that boost her base stats, publicity events where you can bond (if you say the right things), and auditions for TV shows that can increase her fan base. The individual elements are all quite simple: The lessons are basic mini-games, and the publicity events are dating-sim-style conversation scenes. Auditions are another mini-game that emphasizes strategy over fast reflexes, but are surprisingly intense, because you're competing for a limited number of spots against other players over Xbox Live.

There are some interesting strategic concepts at the heart of iDOLM@STER, but I'm going to stop pretending that anyone cares about that. iDOLM@STER is all about the girls, who range in age from 12 (!) to 20 and in personality from Mother Theresa to Paris Hilton. The cell-shaded characters pack so many polygons that in still pictures they look like 2D art, but make no mistake—they're animated in exquisite detail, fidgeting, gesturing, and mouthing every word. You can dress them in a wide variety of costumes and accessories (and will need to do so to stay on top of current pop idol trends), and their elaborately choreographed dance routines will change whenever you release a new single. Every word is fully voiced, and each voice actress sings her own version of the game's sixteen songs. The song list includes everything from syrupy ballads to frenetic dance tunes, and they're all pretty catchy if you don't mind the juvenile, Morning-Musume side of J-pop. (Unfortunately, the synthy background music you're subjected to between performances is horrific, and there's no way to turn that off without muting the songs in the performances as well.)

The girls of iDOLM@STER have been carefully designed to appeal to a wide variety of fanboy fetishes: Wild, studious, tomboyish, bitchy, sweet, eager, mentally troubled—there's a girl for everyone. Of course your relationship is strictly professional; it's your *job* to bond with them, tell them what to do, dress them up in provocative… costumes… Hey—wait a minute! This isn't a strategy game! It's a moe game in disguise! And with preteen girls. Ew. [shivers]

Okay, I can't deny that at times iDOLM@STER feels like a dating sim, and the age of the characters can make it feel a little creepy. Within seconds of accepting 14-year old Miki as a client, for example, she'll declare her "big boobs" to be her greatest strength. Later on, she'll ask you to touch them with the cursor so she'll be



Are you ready for this?

THE iDOLM@STER

mentally prepared for when perverted fans cop a feel. Fortunately, the Lolita complex seems to be restricted mostly to her—you can shake that icky pedophile vibe by choosing one of the older girls. But there's no denying that iDOLM@STER's popularity is rooted less in a love of the music biz, and more in the fact that its premise provides a socially acceptable excuse to interact with cute little anime girls and dress them in fetishistic costumes.

Fortunately, iDOLM@STER does run quite a bit deeper than usual Japanese moe fare. Any game can dish up servile fantasy dream girls, and iDOLM@STER does have a couple of those. But the game gets truly fascinating when you pick someone whose "Character" stat is in the gutter. Then you get the far more interesting experience of trying to get along with someone who knows exactly how beautiful and talented she is, and doesn't have a lot of use for you. Since bonding with the girls is important (it creates happy memories that can be used as a sort of super-move in auditions, for example), a bad attitude makes for an inventive way of balancing high talent scores.

Like getting hooked on a soap opera you only watched to patronize a girlfriend, I bought iDOLM@STER to mock it and ended up legitimately enjoying it. This is currently earning me a great deal of scorn from my friends, who seem strangely unimpressed when I show them Azusa's pitch-perfect performance of *GO MY WAY!!*, so I would love it if we could get an iDOLM@STER scene going on this side of the Pacific. Alas, the odds of a US release seem impossibly remote. But you never know… The localization costs could be kept down by simply subtitling the original voices and songs, and the game could keep its Teen rating with a few little snips... Don't leave me hanging here, Namco-Bandai. It's getting a little embarrassing.

"iDOLM@STER is all about the girls, who range in age from 12 (!) to 20 and in personality from Mother Theresa to Paris Hilton."

iDOLM@STER	score 8.0
+	Great personalities, stunning visuals, tons of content
–	Horrible BGM, mechanics get old quickly, exploitative vibe at times

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Namco-Bandai
Publisher	Namco-Bandai
Available	Now Japan

Trigger Heart Exelica and Karous

Dual Shot Review

words Nick Des Barres

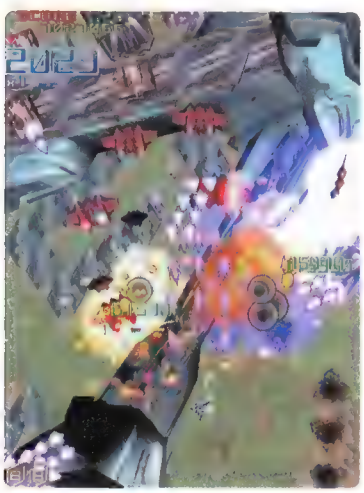
Well, folks, that's it. The Dreamcast is finally gone. Given up the ghost. Gone to meet its maker. Joined the choir invisible. By the time you're reading this, Sega will have ceased production of its proprietary GD-ROM disc format, and the final two games the system will ever see have been released in Japan: Warashi's Trigger Heart Exelica, and Milestone's Karous. Both are so interchangeable we're reviewing them as a single entity: Ikaruga (or even a Cave shooter) these games are not.

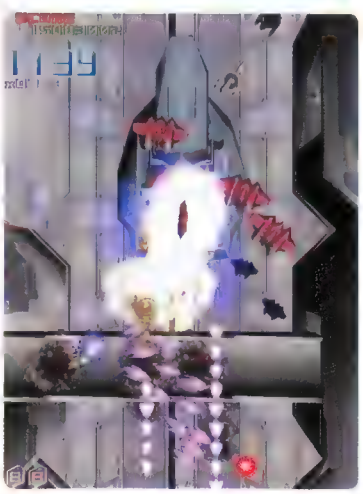
Let us pause for a moment to consider the 2-D shooting game. Surely now *the* most niche of genres, supported only by a handful of tiny developers worldwide...and a perfect match for the Dreamcast circa 2007, supported only by a tiny group of hardcore fans and homebrew aficionados. Yet recall how prevalent shooters once were: Who could forget the simple joys of dodging and shooting, video game cause-and-response at its most immediate, most visceral? What happened to this stalwart, stoic, beloved genre?

I'll tell you what happened: Games like Trigger Heart Exelica and Karous happened. Or rather, continued to happen. Endlessly. Put simply, the space shooter never grew up: The "shmup" equivalent of Devil May Cry, to use an action-adventure analogy, never arrived. Is that a bad thing? Not really. While it may mean mainstream acceptance is no longer possible, a healthy stream of shooters modelled on the classics continue to regularly be made...and indeed the genre clings to life where so many others have all but died (2-D fighters and platformers, I'm looking at you).

Which brings us to the games at hand: Exelica and Karous. More typical

> "Ikaruga (or even a Cave shooter) these games are not."





examples of the *danmaku* ("bullet curtain") school of shooting games can perhaps not be imagined. Both titles feature five stages of vertical-scrolling blastery, with innumerable streams of enemy bullets bursting forth in vaguely hypnotic, geometric patterns. All that serves to distinguish them is aesthetics, and to a lesser extent, game systems.

Exelica, the lesser of the two titles (but only barely), posits a pastel future in which only anthropomorphic jet-girls known as Trigger Hearts can save the galaxy. You take control of either Exelica, whose bullets arc in spread formation but don't pack a lot of firepower, or her "sister" Cruelteat, whose bullets fire at 90° but are stronger. The polygonal visuals are only barely adequate, having been equalled or surpassed long ago on Dreamcast by several other shooters from bigger names. Two things, however, do stand out about the game: The first is its fully-voiced story with multiple endings, and the second is its "Anchor System". By firing a sort of tractor beam, you can latch on to any non-boss-sized enemy and reprogram it (the larger the enemy, the longer the reprogramming time) to either simply explode on the spot (taking any enemies within its blast radius along with it), to be used a shield, or for the ability to hurl it back at the ever-descending stream of bullets, causing it to erase everything in its path. This is frequently the *only* way to get through a wave of pellets that otherwise would be unnavigable, so the extra layer of strategy the Anchor System affords is welcome.

Karous fares slightly better, with its innovative equipment system. On the surface a standard *danmaku* shooter, the true depth of its gameplay is only revealed with several plays. Your three major attacks–gun, sword and shield–all power up individually depending on how often they are used. Shots become wider and more powerful, multiple sword slashes become possible, and your shield eventually levels up to the point that it can reflect enemy bullets. What's interesting here is that maxing out all three in a single playthough is virtually impossible, and the player has to pick and choose what he wants to concentrate on. It's possible to finish the game with any combination, and multiple playthroughs are encouraged. Visually, the game is incredibly drab. If you're familiar with Milestone's previous game, Radirgy/Radio Allergy, imagine that game's poppy cel-shaded visuals with the color saturation dialed down to zero. What was a sunny orange in Radirgy is now a bleak grey, and though the look may mesh with the game's funereal theme, surely a spot of color here and there couldn't have hurt.

And so this is how the Dreamcast ends: With two slightly-better-than-average shooters that will almost certainly be ported to PlayStation 2, and possibly even Wii, if these companies' track records are anything to go by. So why did we even bother covering them? Because, dude, *Dreamcast.* The system's pedigree fairly demands we show respect to its final two releases. In retrospect, Trigger Heart Exelica and Karous may indeed be a perfectly appropriate send-off for the beloved white clamshell: Decent games in an almost forgotten genre, perhaps not quite masterpieces, but certainly solid enough to make one wistful for the good old says. So farewell, sweet Dreamcast. You left us not with a bang, not with a whimper, but rather a nostalgic sigh.

"So farewell, sweet Dreamcast. You left us not with a bang, not with a whimper, but rather a nostalgic sigh."

Trigger Heart Exelica	score 6.0
+	Pleasantly old-school presentation and music, unique Anchor System
–	Average graphics, anemic replay value
System(s)	Dreamcast
Developer	Warashi
Publisher	Warashi
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

Karous	score 6.5
+	Deep systems that allow for actual freedom of gameplay
–	Monochromatic visuals, extreme brevity
System(s)	Dreamcast
Developer	Milestone
Publisher	Milestone
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

Monster World Complete Collection

Run to your nearest import store and tell them "SHOPPING PLEASE!"

words Casey Loe

"The Monster World Collection is an unmitigated delight for fans of the series"

The original Wonder Boy was the game that sold me on a Sega Master System, and its colorful graphics and fast action convinced me that Sega was the future while Nintendo was a passing fad. I may have been wrong about that (Sega can still turn things around—just you wait!), but I wasn't wrong about Wonder Boy, which evolved gradually into the action-RPG Monster World series that delighted fans for a decade before mysteriously disappearing in 1994.

The original Wonder Boy is a little too dated to play now, and its sequel, Wonder Boy in Monster Land (aka Monster World), while a fascinating nostalgia trip, is hardly quality gaming by today's standards. But then things start getting good—Wonder Boy III: The Dragon's Trap (aka Monster World II) is certainly better than any of that NES crap you're playing on your Wii Virtual Console. (But keep enjoying that feature while you can, before the Wii is steamrolled by the Sega Super Master System Mark VII in 2009. BELIEVE IT!)

That brings us to the Genesis/Mega Drive era. Monster Lair's return to arcade style action is showing its age, but 1991's Wonder Boy in Monster World (aka Monster World III) is still a playable, enjoyable, and surprisingly attractive adventure game. The crown jewel of the collection is the Japan-exclusive Monster World IV, which is regarded by Play's staff as one of the platform's ten greatest games, and the best Mega Drive game to ever be passed over for US release.

The collection includes almost every Sega version of each game (including English localizations of most titles), and some of the more obscure versions are a blast for Wonder Boy fans. Highlights include the Europe-exclusive Master System version of Monster World III and the trippy Japanese-arcade version of Monster Lair, in which you begin wearing a diaper, the shops sell beer and cocktails, and enemies bleed when you stab them.

The bonus features are, as to be expected from the Sega Ages series, absolutely phenomenal. You can set the arcade games to speed plays and watch pros beat them in record times. You can see character art galleries and sheet music, cringe at the atrocious cover arts of the American versions, and even read the full manuals from any region. You can set the games to any resolution, any sound hardware (since the Japanese and American Master Systems had different chips), overclock them, whatever. Sadly, there's no lost English translation of Monster World IV, so non-Japanese speakers may have a bit of trouble making it through that gem of a title.

The Monster World Complete Collection is an unmitigated delight for fans of the series. The package was put together by series-developers Westone themselves, and their love for their creation shows through in every design decision, from the touching essays in the 48-page color manual to the treasure trove of bonus materials and, of course, the 100% perfect emulations of every game. All that begs the question of why Westone let the series die in the first place—the team is still together (mostly making ports of licensed properties) and the demand for Monster World is strong enough that the first printing of this collection sold out almost immediately upon its release. Let's hope they got the hint and don't waste another decade neglecting this much-loved series.

Monster World Complete Collection — score 9.0

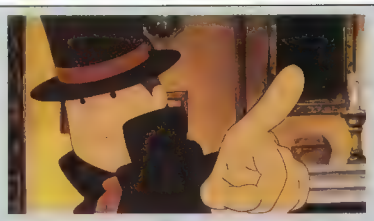
\+ Perfect emulations and tons of bonuses make this an archival-grade product

\- Only the most recent games in the collection will appeal to new fans

System(s)	PS2
Developer	Westone
Publisher	Sega
Available	Now! Japan

Professor Layton and the Mysterious Village

The Brain Training boom finally spawns a real game



words Dai Kohama

Nintendo's Brain Training may have done well in America, but over here it's something else entirely: a cultural phenomenon. Nintendo's titles alone have sold over ten million copies, and imitators release literally dozens of other wannabe "non-games" every month. Into this quagmire of vapid touchpennery is thrust Level-5's Professor Layton and the Mysterious Village, the company's first self-published game.

It's Brain Training, all right–if you consider scads of logic puzzles part of the genre–but it's Brain Training with a *story*. Level-5 is, obviously, famous for their RPGs (Dark Cloud series, Dragon Quest VIII, Rogue Galaxy), and despite puzzles only tangentially integrated into the plot, Layton does ultimately feel like a game created by storytellers.

Two months ago a Mr. Allen Reinford, gentleman of means, passed away leaving a very mysterious will. It read in its entirety: "To my dear family. Somewhere in this town I have hidden a Golden Fruit. Whosoever shall find it is to receive all my earthly possessions." Baffled by their relative's curious will, the Reinford family retains the services of esteemed gentleman, famous archaeologist, and sometime investigator for hire, Professor Layton of London. In a thoroughly Doylian touch, the Professor is accompanied everywhere by a bright, scrappy young boy named Luke.

What follows is two disparate, but compelling experiences, one an adventure game riff on Victorian mystery set in a Miyazaki-esque fantasyland, the other a collection of genuinely challenging logic, spatial, and mathematic puzzles. As the story progresses, Layton and his sidekick Luke are asked rather implausibly to solve puzzles (and occasionally finding one in context) in order to gain information that will bring them every closer to solving the true mystery of Reinford's Golden Fruit. All of them are exceedingly well-done (having been overseen by a real-life professor, Akira Tago of Chiba University, famous for his "Head Exercises" series of quiz books that began in the 1960s), are never overly-frustrating, and never obfuscate with inadequate instructions or "trick" answers. Level-5 is even distributing one new puzzle each week via Wi-Fi, for at least a year.

"It's Brain Training, all right–if you consider scads of logic puzzles part of the genre–but it's Brain Training with a story."

As good as the puzzles are, the presentation is almost better. Incredibly high-budget for a DS game, Layton buoys gorgeous, sepia-toned production design with a great deal of cel-animated FMV and copious voice acting by extremely high-dollar talent (including acclaimed actor You Oizumi brilliantly cast against type as Professor Layton). Titles like this make one realize what really can be done with the DS hardware, when developers play to its strengths instead of unneccesarily trying to squeeze 3-D out of the machine when it isn't warranted, or worse, relying on quick cash-ins.

Unfortunately, Layton hasn't been picked up yet for American release...and thanks to what would undoubtedly be a costly localization, it may never be. This would be a shame, as despite its major shortcoming (puzzles irrelevant to the plot), it really feels like the first major third-party DS game with a *positive* influence from the Brain Training boom, and two more games starring Layton have already been announced. Here's hoping that if nothing else, Layton's Japanese success inspires more quality adventures for DS.

Professor Layton and the Mysterious Village	score 8.0
+ Solid puzzles, wonderful atmosphere	
– Puzzles poorly integrated into story	
System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Level-5
Publisher	Level-5
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

HELLGATE
LONDON

Under a blood red sky

words Mike Griffin

Hellgate: London takes place in 2038. Like a prophet's worst nightmare, legions of Hell have broken through into our plane and most of the planet has been razed and burned. The millions that died have become an endless source of fodder, re-animated by demons and compelled to hunt the living. "Hellgate is set in a world where the impossible is possible, the rumored is fact, conspiracy theories are reality, and evil is manifest," explains Bill Roper, Flagship Studios' CEO. Survivors of this apocalypse have found small sanctuaries in the London subway system, whose Freemason builders, foretelling Hell's crossing, imbued each station with powerful protective blessings. You begin Hellgate: London as a survivor clinging to life underground in a world gone terribly wrong.

Hellgate: London	
Developer	Flagship Studios
Publisher	EA/Namco Bandai
Online/Multi	Co-op, PvP Arena, Guilds
Available	Q3 2007
ESRB Rating	RP

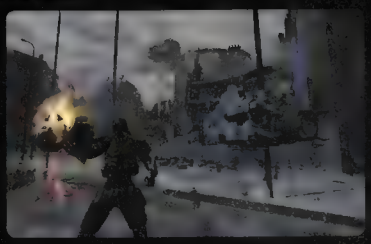
Three factions have come to dominate the tiny society below the charred and disheveled ruins of London: the Templar, Cabalist and Hunter. Though history suggests that the Knights Templar were holy soldiers sworn to protect the bloodline of Christ, Hellgate's Templar has taken on the role of mankind's savior. They seek only the Truth. They've been preparing for these dark days for centuries, gathering blessed palladium metals and fusing divine energy into towering suits of gleaming armor. The Templar trains Guardians and Blademasters. The Guardian is a lumbering, shield-slamming defensive master who lives to get hit; in fact, he has skills that allow him to gain defense the more he is pummeled. The Flagship CEO spends a lot of time in the trenches play-testing, so we asked Bill for his take on the Blademaster:

"Members of this Templar class are mainly focused on offensive power. They're instantly recognizable for their ability to wield two swords. One way they channel their divine powers is to charge their blades with Surges of holy energy: the more damage they do, the more their blades are imbued with power. These Surges don't last indefinitely though, so the Blademaster has to keep plowing through enemies to maintain his advantage."

The Cabalist is a post-apocalyptic sorcerer, one part wizard, another part warlock. Their kind has existed for thousands of years: shamans, witches, magicians—those who could feel and harness the higher powers that were invisible to others. Hellgate's devastated future Earth is now polluted with chaotic eldritch energies and the Cabalist has stepped in to add some method to the mayhem. Summoners and Evokers are the first two classes of this faction. The Summoner is a pet specialist. Call forth a half-dozen smaller fire elementals or one huge stone tanker. Better yet, summon a minion that can mind-control enemies and use them as pets. We asked Bill about his experience using the Evoker...

"This type of Cabalist concentrates on channeling the forces of the elements and tapping into the power of the Well of Midnight to wield the power of the Nameless Fire. A favorite tactic of mine is to use the Evoker's ability to drain both life and power to fuel my close range Firestorm spell. This spell has a short range, but can be totally devastating to a group of demons. By draining power from my targets before attacking, I can keep my mana levels high. And since I need to get in close for this spell to be its best, I also drain life to keep myself alive.

The Hunter is perhaps the most contemporary of the factions. Like the mercenaries and assassins that have persisted in society for millennia, the Hunter relies on sophisticated weapons and gear to get the job done. This Hellgate faction is represented by ex-military and covert ops trained in the role of Marksman and Engineer. While the other two factions emphasize auto-lock or soft-lock targeting, the Marksman is all about pinpoint FPS aiming and super-science munitions. They find vantage points using stealth and improve their damage output via multi-shots, ricochets and rapid fire. Bill's thoughts on this faction's tech-adept second class, the Engineer:



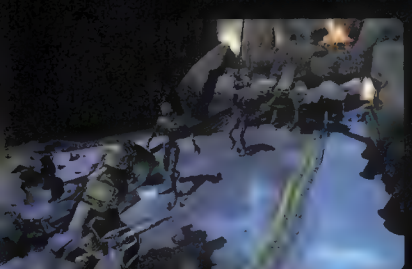
"I love pet classes, and the Engineer has a very fun way to build pets by utilizing equipment that you can't normally use. This Hunter specializes in the construction and alteration of machinery, the biggest of which is the Drone. Starting with a basic chassis, the Engineer can learn skills that allow him to retrofit weapons and armor right onto the Drone. The Drone can be upgraded as the Engineer progresses, allowing the player to evolve his companion as well."

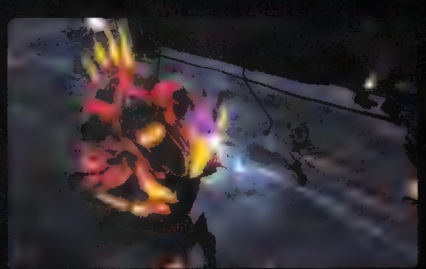
There's still a fair bit of misunderstanding when it comes to Hellgate's campaign, so let's clear it up. After you finish the tutorial and join one of the aforementioned factions, you set off from Russell Square to find the next safe station. Most of the tunnel has been cleared of major debris, but the threat of demons, zombies, darklings, imps and other abominations is very real. Think of the game in randomized dungeon RPG terms, then add real missions and triple-A production values to the equation. Each major chunk of Hellgate's campaign is divided into an Act consisting of several station hubs, a dozen or more randomized levels, hell rifts and fixed challenges. You're free to travel back and forth between Acts you've completed. The Hellgate campaign is completely interchangeable as a single-player or multiplayer action RPG experience right up until the ending cinematic, however the game's story will continue online after that point.

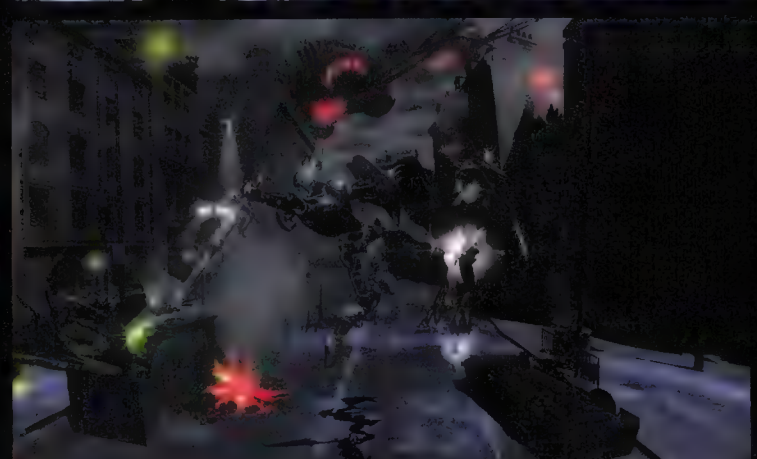
Hellgate: London could easily be the dark horse hit of 2007. It's already a Dark Horse comic. Consider how much territory the game covers: persistent character growth, tons of loot, tons of ways to modify said loot, first and third-person gameplay, single and multiplayer campaign, item trading, randomized replayability…and that fantastic creature design by Phil Shenk, Diablo 2's monster guru. Keep reading—Hellgate: London's music duo is next.

"…the Blademaster has to keep plowing through enemies to maintain his advantage."

Bill Roper, CEO - Flagship Studios







Bring bullets, broadswords, alchemy and magic.

The Music of Hellgate: London

Divine melodies for a demonic beat down

You've heard Sascha Dikiciyan's music in Quake 2 and 3 and more recently in Ubisoft's Dark Messiah and TMNT, both co-produced with current partner Cris Velasco, another games music veteran with titles like Maximo and God of War in his portfolio. Flagship Studios has called upon this award-winning composer duo to soundtrack a doomed Earth on the edge of extinction in this summer's Hellgate: London.

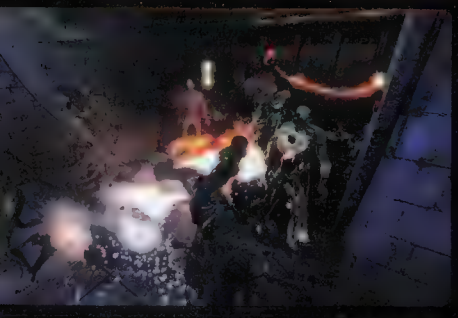
Lead Composers
Sascha Dikiciyan and Cris Velasco

play: With names like Flagship Studios and EA involved, Hellgate: London is a pretty huge game. How much responsibility do you guys have on this soundtrack?
Cris: We've been responsible for all the music in the game. The whole Flagship audio team has been very supportive. Not only have they given us a lot of creative freedom, but Flagship has been great about keeping us in the loop. From little things like sending us artwork and video captures to flying us out regularly to play through the most recent build of the game, it's been a great experience.
Sascha: Hellgate is a musician's dream comes true. Seriously, I have not met another sound team that gives you so much freedom and is willing to take a lot of chances. The music of Hellgate isn't your typical game score and these days it's hard to find developers who are willing to take chances.

> "Hellgate is a musician's dream comes true. Seriously, I have not met another sound team that gives you so much freedom and is willing to take a lot of chances."
>
> Sascha Dikiciyan, Lead Composer

Hellgate has this great mix of fantasy, gothic, tech and arcane. Does this kind of hybrid blend of aesthetic ingredients make it easier or tougher on a composer?
CV: It makes for a very interesting soundtrack. I think anyone would be hard-pressed to put a label on the Hellgate score. When we first started working on the music it was definitely hard to nail down the style that we wanted. Hellgate is such a blend of fantasy and sci-fi, old and modern, that one genre of music wasn't really going to fit particularly well with the visuals and the player's experience. So Sascha and I took elements from lots of styles and experimented with combining them in unusual ways.

Did you pick up any new instruments or hardware for the studio specifically for this project?
CV: I purchased a new Gibson Les Paul for some of the guitar work. Mostly though, I'm using my standard orchestra. It's how I'm using the instruments that make the



Music to your ears: the sound of sizzling undead

Sound FX

David Steinwedel
Sound Supervisor - Flagship Studios

play: What kind of real-life sources did you use to generate sound effects for the carnage-filled action in Hellgate: London?
David: A huge collection of animals, humans, fire, electricity, wind, subways and trains, guns, explosions, impacts, and metal was gathered to use as our base material from which to begin painting. We employ almost every trick and cliché in the book, from horror classics to game standards, and even cartoons, to supply material for the massive number of assets in this game.

score sound different.
SD: Oh yeah. I'm a complete gear nerd. I always buy new toys for a lot of projects. For Hellgate I've bought Electron's Monomachine. It's an awesome synth which combines several different synthesis techniques into one. Then there's the Waveshaper from Metasonix. The Waveshaper uses vacuum tubes to get some really nasty, crude distortion. I have it hooked up to various drum machines which I used for a lot of the percussion in Hellgate. There are also quite a lot of drones, beats, weird stuff done within Kyma, which I upgraded for this project.

Are you doing any cool sound engine stuff with stingers and mixing?
CV: The sound engine is extremely complex. Guy Somberg, the audio programmer, is like a modern Dr. Frankenstein when he created this beast. We're doing tons of multi-function stingers, plus multiple endings and intros, plus numerous remixes of every track in the game. The great news for players is that this has the net effect of keeping the music random sounding while never feeling like we've switched cues.

Did you get to score the cut-scenes for the campaign story bits as well? That first cinematic Flagship released is insane...
CV: Yes, we scored all the cut-scenes as well. Each one is a movie in its own right that rivals anything I've watched in the theater. The cinematics are truly among the best I've ever seen. We hope our music enhances the experience.
SD: Hellgate's cinematics are amazing. We've tried to stay musically as close as possible to the in-game score so everything will tie in nicely. There are certain themes that will appear in both the movies and in the actual game. I've had a chance to see one of the cinematics on the mixing stage, big screen and full 5.1 surround sound. It was just mind-blowing to be honest.

Dynamic mixing means no stale battle tunes.

"The sound engine is extremely complex. Guy Somberg, the audio programmer, is like a modern Dr. Frankenstein when he created this beast."

Cris Velasco, Lead Composer

www.playing.ztrip.com

LIVE reborn on Games for Windows

words Mike Griffin

Microsoft's continued proliferation of Xbox LIVE has resulted in a multi-million user success story—one that has remained exclusive to the console realm for years. This era is coming to an end on May 8th when Halo 2 launches for Windows Vista with built-in LIVE support. In a continuing effort to narrow the divide between PC and console gamers, Microsoft is bringing its online service to the PC platform under a brand called Games for Windows – LIVE. All the core Xbox LIVE features that you've come to love will soon be available through Vista, including the tantalizing prospect of cross-platform multiplayer action. We check in with JJ Richards, General Manager of LIVE at Microsoft, for all the details.

"...developers are free to design for bigger audiences and focus on innovative gameplay that you could only do by bridging the console and PC communities."

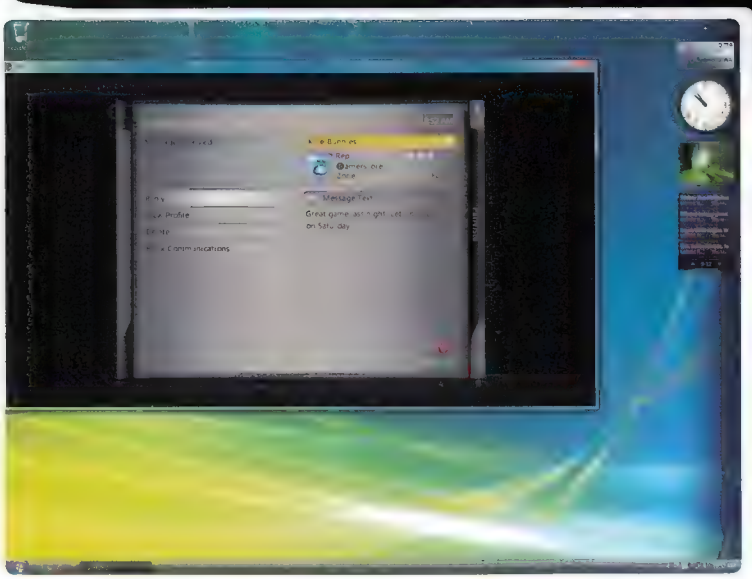
JJ Richards, General Manager of LIVE, Microsoft

Interview

JJ Richards
General Manager of LIVE, Microsoft

"We're connecting two platforms in a way that has never been done before and this is no small feat."

JJ Richards, General Manager of LIVE, Microsoft



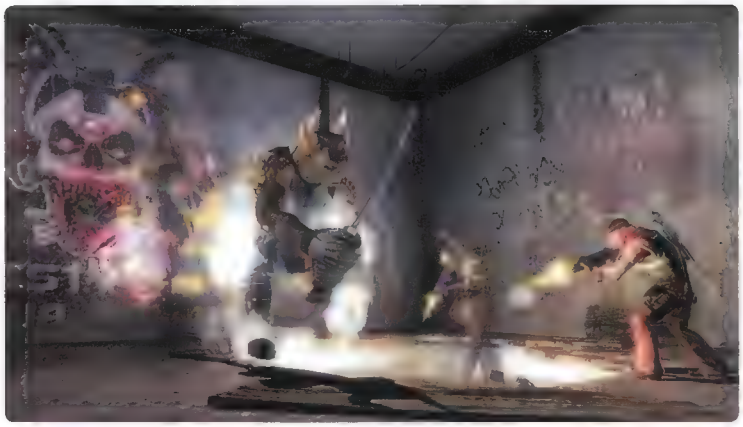
play: Compared to the Xbox 360 dashboard experience, how easy is it for the user to launch the Games for Windows – LIVE guide?
JJ Richards: The Games for Windows – LIVE guide can be easily launched within any LIVE-enabled Games for Windows title by either hitting the guide button on the Xbox 360 controller (connected to a Windows machine either via USB, or wirelessly using the Xbox 360 Wireless Gaming Receiver for Windows) or by hitting a key on the keyboard. From the guide, gamers can access and experience community features of Games for Windows – LIVE, including connecting with friends online for multiplayer gameplay and voice communication or text and voice messaging. Additionally, gamers can access their Gamerscore and Achievements as well as see what their friends are presently doing online.

We understand that Gold subscribers will get to experience all the best features of LIVE on both Xbox 360 and Windows for a single fee. This is a great incentive for Silver members to upgrade.
Our first priority is to deliver a consistent online gaming experience across *both* platforms. We are confident that we have accomplished that with the unified profile, Gamertag, Gamerscore, Achievements and Friends List for all, while enabling cross-platform gameplay for Gold members. As with Xbox LIVE, we will continue to look at ways to enhance the Windows service.

The new vertical layout seems ideal for PC resolutions and mouse and keyboard...
The Games for Windows – LIVE Guide has been optimized for Windows Vista. The look and feel will work better in a windowed environment and with higher screen resolutions. The Guide works equally well with both the keyboard and mouse as it does with the Xbox 360 controller.

How about Windows users that aren't running Vista?
The first Games for Windows – LIVE titles to launch, Halo 2 Vista, Shadowrun and UNO, will be available for Windows Vista only, and Shadowrun will also be available for Xbox 360. We have nothing else to announce at this time, but will continue to look into opportunities to grow the Games for Windows - LIVE portfolio.

What sort of content will Windows LIVE Arcade provide compared to Xbox 360? Should PC gamers expect some exclusives from MS' Casual Games component?



Games for Windows LIVE

Microsoft Casual Games is committed to delivering more titles that take advantage of Games for Windows – LIVE. The Casual games category is one of the fastest growing areas in the gaming market and has an audience ready and waiting for a better online experience. Windows gamers will be able to download fantastic, LIVE-enabled casual games, beginning with UNO later this year.

Is Microsoft now actively encouraging developers to create Vista and 360 titles that contain cross-platform multiplayer?
With this cross-platform infrastructure in place, developers are free to design for bigger audiences and focus on innovative gameplay that you could only do by bridging the console and PC communities. Our goal is to provide publishers and developers with the world's best tools and support so they can build the world's best games. We have a lot of people that we're talking to who are interested in this space given what new possibilities our LIVE gaming service is creating.

How does the LIVE service facilitate the cross-platform process *before* the game begins—i.e., stuff like matchmaking between Xbox 360 and Windows players?
It's important to remember that this is a unified gaming service you can access on either Xbox 360 or Windows from within the game. It connects you to the people you want to play with, regardless of platform. Games for Windows – LIVE will initially be delivered as part of the games that support it, including Halo 2 for Windows Vista, Shadowrun, and UNO.

What are some big priorities for the LIVE team right now, in terms of continued enhancements to the Widows edition of the service going forward?
Games for Windows – LIVE will evolve over time just as Xbox LIVE has incorporated new functionality over the past five years. Games for Windows – LIVE is another major leap forward in delivering the vision that Bill Gates presented to the industry last year: We're connecting two platforms in a way that has never been done before and this is no small feat. We're very proud of how far we've come in such a short amount of time and we'll continue to listen to gamers and developers in how to keep moving ahead in the years to come.

Halo 2 on Vista

Halo 2 Vista is bringing more to the table than higher resolutions and 40+ single-player Achievements, including a serious LIVE multiplayer component and a map editor courtesy of Pi Studios. Map builders can play their creations on servers with custom rules, so expect some wild combinations. Though online play in H2V is strictly PC-to-PC (Shadowrun will be the first title to introduce cross-platform LIVE gameplay this summer), it's striving to be the definitive expression of Halo 2 multiplayer.

Feast your eyes on two of Halo 2 Vista's all-new multiplayer maps, **Uplift** and **District**, along with some insight from the maps' creators.

Uplift

"With Uplift, I knew I wanted to do something similar to Relic, which is my favorite of the Halo 2 multiplayer maps. During the rough layout, I experimented with creating this huge bridge stretching across the area. The bridge would be a traffic focal point, making things insanely chaotic and dangerous for players on foot, but also tricky to drive in a vehicle. Just as I had hoped, the bridge ended up being the infantry route and the terrain below is a vehicle playground."

Jeremy Statz, Pi Studios Senior Designer

District

"As a player, I always wanted to have that experience in multiplayer of speeding through the streets and alleyways of New Mombasa in a Warthog, having a running gun fight over the rooftops, and sniping at opposing players as they moved in and out of cover and ducked into alleyways on the intervening city streets. The initial inspiration for District came from the starting areas in the Outskirts single player campaign. I always thought the atrium area had a lot of great multiplayer gameplay potential."

David Mertz, Pi Studios Lead Designer

Infernal

Pulp diction

words Mike Griffin

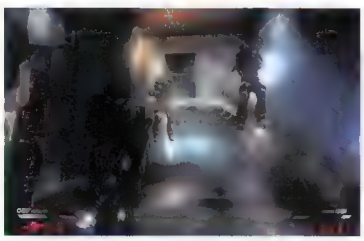
Infernal could've been a much needed injection of third-person action for PC players. Instead, Infernal is a very pretty let down. The game knows how it wants to execute its straightforward action, dresses it up in lovely, highly-optimized visuals, and then forgets to connect the dots. Play mechanics ripe for exploitation are barely tapped and the late stage rewrite of Infernal's narrative stumbles through shaky voice-over and uneven cinematics, reducing an already-flaky story to crumbs.

The endless war between Heaven and Hell is fought here on Earth via special agents like Infernal's protagonist Ryan Lennox. The character design itself is cool enough and he's very nicely textured (like all models in Infernal), however Ryan is a good example of the slipshod English localization that should not have been approved. He sounds like Jason Statham with a bad accent, and the actor chokes on inflection and pronunciation far too often. There's also serious inconsistency when it comes to enemy chatter. The US voice track should've been re-recorded. Regardless of language, the source material for the narrative is squandered. Infernal's plot starts-out engaging, then quickly sputters. The Etherlight vs. Hell story is begging for a chance to stretch-out this ride (explore the history, introduce more agents), instead it gets stuffed into the trunk. Not the best place to be for a bumpy ride.

"The solid gunplay... can't save Infernal from its steadfast unwillingness to try harder."

Ryan's animation is too rigid for a third-person action avatar. He feels boxy, his jumps are stiff and his melee is just poor. Frankly, Infernal would've been better off as a first-person shooter; the basic gun combat is the only facet of gameplay that feels confident. Ryan's infernal hell powers are screaming to be used in all sorts of *much better* scenarios. Why not have unique puzzles or story-enhancing secrets using the hell vision, instead of boring pass codes? How about interactivity using teleportation that goes beyond hitting a button on a terminal? The solid gunplay, even great moments like the hangar battle, can't save Infernal from its steadfast unwillingness to try harder.

Infernal is nonetheless a good-looking shooter with some intense set-piece battles that arrive with just enough frequency to keep you on your toes and blur the banality. Unfortunately. in an age when third-person games have champions like Resident Evil 4 and Gears of War, a half-baked contender like Infernal doesn't stand out.



Infernal score **7.0**

+	Nice art direction and exciting PhysX blasts. Some entertaining shoot-outs. Last boss is huge and impressive.
–	Great PhysX on certain objects, dubious lack of destructibility for others. Crude door "puzzles." Terrible ending.

Developer	Metropolis
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	None
Available	May
ESRB Rating	M

intel Core 2 Duo inside

Dual-core. Do more.

REDEFINING YOUR STANDARDS

THE NEW AREA-51 m9750

Experience substance behind the style with the new Area-51® m9750 featuring dual graphics cards, Intel® Core™ 2 Duo processors and dual hard drives.

Call toll-free or visit online to learn more at:

WWW.ALIENWARE.COM/PLAY 1.800.ALIENWARE

Alienware can not be held responsible for errors in photography or typography. Actual case may vary in design. Availability may change without notice. Alienware, Alienware Alien head logo and Area-51 are registered trademarks or trademarks of Alienware Corporation. Intel, the Intel logo, Intel Core and Core Inside are trademarks or registered trademarks of Intel Corporation or its subsidiaries in the United States and other countries. All other registered trademarks and trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

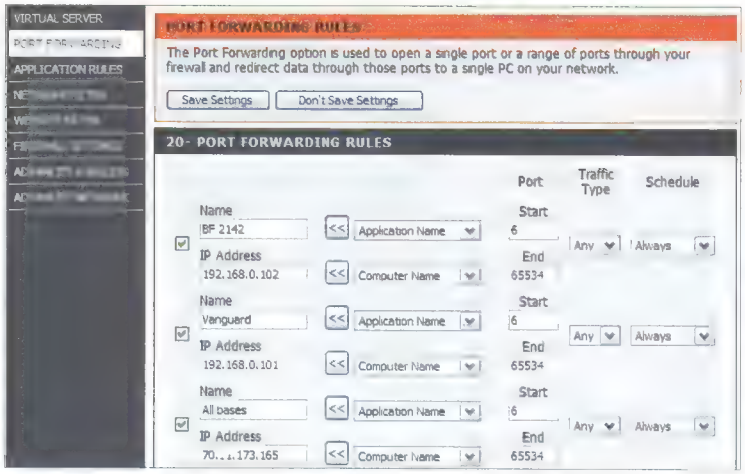
ask alienware

no. 011 // may 2007

"Remember, a firewall is a real security device there for your protection..."

q. **It seems like every PC game asks me to open a different router port for multiplayer gameplay. Instead of making all these little exceptions for each game, can't I just create a rule in my router that allows an unlimited range of ports to be open at once, so every game works fine? Unless that's risky...** Chris, Glendale CA

Alienware: We do not recommend opening any ports unless the game specifically asks for it, in which case, you should create a rule within the firewall. Remember, a firewall is a real security device there for your protection, so be careful.



q. **Can I expect to get good game performance from a PC that's built from the ground up to be as silent as possible? I plan to add a computer to my home entertainment center for both games and movies, but I'm very anal when it comes to room acoustics. The last thing I want to hear during a quiet film are loud computer fans. I fear I'll be stuck with a gimpy gaming PC if I go for the lowest noise volume possible.** Mark, Ridgewood NJ.

Alienware: Keeping noise low while handling the thermal output of a high-end system can be difficult, but it is not insurmountable. A quick way to lower the noise output of your system is to liquid cool your components. If you are uncomfortable with incorporating this type of technology, our recommendation would be to go with larger sized, low velocity fans. You can also utilize different materials to dampen the noise that is generated—just be careful not to create excessive heat.

Ozma 7 Headphones

by Alienware and Ultrasone

Buried away beneath the insane desktops, workstations and notebooks in Alienware's catalogue, you may have overlooked the Ozma 7 headphones in their gear section. We did too...until we noticed that the Ozma 7 uses S-Logic, the celebrated surround sound design of German headphone maker Ultrasone. Ultrasone builds really good headphones. Turns-out the Ozma 7 is full-blooded Ultrasone, a hybrid of their HFI 700, which uses roughly the same parts as their studio-grade Proline 650. There's some serious pedigree and quality here.

The Ozma 7's sound is superb. Like Ultrasone's own lineup, the sound quality easily rivals headphones from Sennheiser and Sony in the same tier. And forget about those gimmicky, unwieldy surround sound gaming headphones with sub par sound quality; the Ozma 7 has bright and smooth high and mid-range, and precise, slightly-boosted bass. The 07's closed-cup design blocks out external noise very nicely and the surround effect created by S-Logic is realistic and satisfying, not overpowering or artificial. Sound disperses across your whole ear (as if listening to good studio speakers), instead of targeting only the inner ear.

The Ozma 7 headphones excel in many ways, not just as an audiophile-grade gaming solution. With its fine spatial sound and lovely balance of highs, mids and lows, you may literally start to hear new sounds in music you've listened to a thousand times before.

q. **I'm at a crossroads where I can buy a PC with a Blu-ray drive or a PS3 (I'm buying a new PC regardless). I currently have an Xbox 360 so I'm already in the next-generation as they say. The reason I'd like the Blu-ray drive is twofold: First, I burn a lot of data back-ups and 50 GB per disc sounds heaven sent! Second, regarding movie playback, you can get much better 1080p image quality from a PC with a good Nvidia or ATI card, right?** Tim, Vancouver WA.

Alienware: If you want to be able to burn to a Blu-ray disc, you will need to go with a PC, as the PS3 of course does not burn Blu-ray discs. In regards to your second question, yes, the latest Nvidia and ATI cards will output really great quality to your 1080p display and are already ahead of PS3 graphics. If your decision is based on Blu-ray, then a PC will clearly afford you more options. *Note:* To burn 50GB of data, you will need a Dual Layer Blu-ray disc, as single layer is 25GB.

Afro Samurai

The man enjoys his lemonade

words Casey Loe

When I heard Sam Jackson, Spike TV and RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan were collaborating on an anime called *Afro Samurai*, my first reaction surely echoed that of yours: "Wow. That is going to *suck*." Little did I know that it was based on a cult doujinshi manga, spearheaded by Japan's GONZO studios, and being made with one of the highest budgets in anime history. Needless to say, it did not suck. And Sam, I apologize.

Afro Samurai doesn't get enough credit for its unexpected wit and flavorful setting, but its simple tale of revenge takes a backseat to the stylish and brutal action scenes that occur several times per episode. You have to be pretty confident in your animation skills to focus this much on combat, and Studio GONZO definitely has the goods. The animation is far and away the best that the studio has ever produced, and is probably among the best ever seen outside of feature films. Afro Samurai is legendary for its million-dollar-per-episode production budget, and every last penny of it has made its way to the screen. Constant combat can have a numbing effect in other anime, but like a good Jackie Chan or Jet Li movie, every battle is unique and flavorful, packed with clever gimmicks and unusual perspectives.

The cast is lead by big-name talent like Ron Perlman and Kelly Hu, and of course, Samuel L. Jackson. Sam plays two roles, and his constant blather as Ninja-Ninja, Afro's sidekick, is thoroughly annoying. But the few words he says as the taciturn Afro Samurai are utterly priceless—if you're still quoting *Snakes on a Plane*, you really need to pick this up and update your Jacksonisms. (As an American-funded production, there is no subtitled version—even in Japan, *Afro Samurai* airs with English voice talent.)

For such a high-profile, high-budget project, Funimation is being unexpectedly generous with the DVD's. Instead of splitting *Afro Samurai's* five episodes into two volumes, we're getting the whole series in one reasonably priced package. The Director's Cut is twice the price of the standard edition (which has only the Spike TV versions of each episode), but contains fifteen minutes of new footage, a few featurettes, and a look at the Takahashi Okazaki doujinshi manga that started it all. The added content includes a fair amount of explicit sex, but is primarily non-objectionable scenes that were cut to make more room for Mountain Dew and Amp'd Mobile commercials on Spike TV.

Anime is going mainstream in the US, and if that means more films and TV series with *Afro Samurai's* level of production values and voice talent, then these are glorious days indeed.

"...like a good Jackie Chan or Jet Li movie, every battle is unique and flavorful"

Afro Samurai score 9.5

\+ Gorgeous animation, tons of memorable moments

– Drags a bit towards the end

Released By	FUNimation
Volume	1
Running Time	2.05 (+ featurettes)
Episodes	5
Rating	Unrated
Available	May 22

Kurau Phantom Memory

クラウ ファントムメモリー

A future classic is born

words Bill Gray

Despite myriad new ways to make connections, we're more alone than ever, drowning in a sea of alternate worlds, flickering screens and disembodied voices. It's only reasonable to expect that separation to escalate as we move further into the future. *Kurau Phantom Memory*, from ADV, captures the isolation of the future beautifully through a heroine who desperately longs for connection and who, after she finds it, does everything she can to keep that connection. Oh, and she also blows things up from time to time as well, which is pretty cool.

Living a lonely life as an Agent, Kurau earns a living by working as hired muscle, sort of the Werner Wolf of the anime set. She can solve any problem, do any job—usually with a minimum of fuss and effort. Her secret? Within Kurau is a mysterious energy known as the Rynax, which was released into our world by accident ten years ago through an experiment led by Kurau's father. This energy gives Kurau any number of powers, from the ability to fly to the power to walk through walls, Kitty Pryde-style. The desperately lonely existence mandated by her unique powers comes to an end when Kurau finally encounters her literal "soul-mate," the oddly-named Christmas, and all hell breaks loose as the Global Police try to capture the pair.

Anime excels at capturing feelings of loss, loneliness and alienation, stringing a line of bittersweet moments together like clouds chasing each other across the sky. *Kurau* does this better than any anime I've seen since *Evangelion*. Now don't get me wrong—it certainly isn't *better* than *Eva*. But *Kurau* stirred up some of the same feelings in me as *Eva* did way back when I was biking to the university to watch anime with the college kids. There's enough action, technology and mystery in *Kurau* to please any fan of sci-fi anime, but there's also a fascinating character at the center of the show in the person of Kurau. Her past, her Rynax abilities, her relationship with Christmas and with her father—these concerns form the emotional center of the show, taking what is a very good sci-fi story and elevating it to another level.

The show itself looks spectacular. Typical of Studio BONES, *Kurau* features richly detailed future cityscapes and textured, spare beauty interspersed with fluid and expressive character animation. A haunting, evocative soundtrack and well-cast Japanese and English voices complete the show, giving it life and breadth. *Kurau* is that rare show that gets almost everything right. My only beef lies in the somewhat uneven pacing of the episodes; though I love the introspection, I'd love to see Kurau blow stuff up with a little more frequency.

Kurau Phantom Memory score 9.5

\+ A slick, utterly cool sci-fi/action story with style to spare.

\- More explosions please.

Released By	ADV Films
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	TV-14
Available	Now

"There's enough action, technology and mystery in Kurau to please any fan of sci-fi anime..."

Kurau has it all, including ample parts sci-fi.

DRAGON BALL Z – REMASTERED

SEASON TWO

AVAILABLE MAY 22ND 2007

OVER 800 MINUTES OF UNCUT ACTION!

You won't believe how powerful it is now! – Newtype USA

DRAGON BALL Z: PERFECT – THE DEFINITIVE COLLECTION

Includes:

- ★ *THE COMPLETE NAMEK SAGA (First time on DVD)*
- ★ *THE COMPLETE CAPTAIN GINYU SAGA*
- ★ *35 POWERFUL EPISODES on 6 DISCS!*
- ★ *NEWLY REVISED ENGLISH DIALOGUE with ORIGINAL JAPANESE MUSIC*
- ★ *MARATHON PLAY SPECIAL FEATURE*

www.dragonballz.com

TOEI ANIMATION

© 2006 BIRD STUDIO, SHUEISHA, TOEI ANIMATION ©1989 TOEI ANIMATION CO., LTD. Licensed by FUNimation® Productions, Ltd. All Rights Reserved. Dragon Ball Z and all logos, character names and distinctive likenesses thereof are trademarks of TOEI ANIMATION.

FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT
A NAVARRE CORPORATION COMPANY

"Tsubasa is deftly written with the characters' struggles taking center stage..."

Elegant and lean, CLAMP is in the air.

Tsubasa RESERVoir CHRoNicle

ツバサ・レザボアクロニクル

Birds of a feather...

words Hal Davidson

Any anime or manga fan worth their salt knows the name CLAMP, the four-woman artist troupe responsible for some of the most revered manga of the past two decades, among them *Chobits*, *X/1999*, and *Cardcaptor Sakura*, all of which have enjoyed exceptional anime adaptations. *Sakura* garnered so much attention among fan groups that they decided to assimilate it into an entirely different universe—that of Tsubasa.

Princess Sakura and Syaoran have been friends since childhood, but recently her emotions have developed into something stronger than just friendship. Determined to tell Syaoran how she feels, she heads to the underground section of excavated ruins to express her feelings, but before she can tell him how she feels, events transpire that scatter her memories across four worlds. Setting out to retrieve the four feathers of her memory, Sakura regains little bits of her self along the way as each one is found, although a deal with a Time-Space witch prevents her from remembering Syaoran... Hence the dramatic twist prevalent in all of CLAMP's work.

The idea of taking familiar characters and having them cross over into similarly familiar character universes is nothing new; American comic companies do multi-book crossover miniseries annually. But to do so after dozens of manga is a daunting task that CLAMP makes look easy.

Tsubasa is deftly written with the characters' struggles taking center stage, but such is the nature of CLAMP productions. Their gift—an uncanny ability to captivate an audience through dialogue—is a rare one in anime. Coupled with an unmistakable air of sophistication and detail in whatever they do, *Tsubasa*, like *Magic Knight Rayearth*, *X*, and so on, is bound for glory.

Tsubasa RESERVoir CHRoNiCLE score 9.0

+	High drama, wonderful character designs, familiar (beloved) characters
–	Pacing may be slow for action fans, however, like all CLAMP productions it's only a matter of time...

Released By	FUNimation Productions
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	1 5
Rating	13+
Available	May 22, 2007

Hollywood Can Go To Hell!
"Black Lagoon is ready to weigh in as a serious contender for supplanting Cowboy Bebop's audience."
— Scott Green, Ain't It Cool News
BLACK LAGOON
BLACK LAGOON © REI HIROE, SHOGAKUKAN / BLACK LAGOON COMMITTEE
WWW.BLACKLAGOONCOMPANY.COM
geneon

Blood+

words Casey Loe

Blood: The Last Vampire was a visual tour-de-force, but didn't manage to tell much of a story in its brief 48 minute running time. That makes it a great candidate for a series, though *Blood+* has little in common with the film's unique tale of vampires in Vietnam. When the series opens, Saya (the "last vampire" of the film) is a high school student in Okinawa with a bad case of anemia and no memory beyond the last year. But her memories begin to return when Chiroptera attack her school, sending her on a globe-spanning quest to defeat the source of the evil and fill in the blanks of the last several decades.

Production I.G. (the studio that is also behind Adult Swim's *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*) has done their usual stellar work with the animation, and the director is particularly deft at capturing the personalities of the characters with subtle details like Kaori eating a speck of food off of Saya's face. But anyone expecting a return to the digital techniques pioneered by the film will be disappointed - *Blood+* is almost entirely straight-up pencil-and-ink animation. The action scenes are gory enough to justify the title and earn *Blood+* a rare TV-MA rating, but it might as well be Teletubbies compared to the orgy of bloodletting in the film.

"Production I.G. has done their usual stellar work with the animation..."

Blood+ settles quickly into a comfortable girl-in-school-uniform-killing-monsters groove, in which Saya must balance the needs of her adoptive family, her search for her past, and her vampire-slaying duties. It's like a horrifically violent *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, which always makes for a satisfying formula. Unfortunately, the dubbing isn't up to the usual standards of Adult Swim shows. Some of the main characters are well-voiced, but the supporting players either ham up their roles or read their lines in a sleepy monotone. Ugh.

It's nice to see Adult Swim sink its teeth into something meaty, and with a 50 episode run *Blood+* will keep vamping well into 2008. It has plenty of action, intrigue, and pathos and runs a little more adult (in every sense of the word) than Adult Swim's other series. Older anime fans won't be finding a better deal on basic cable anytime soon.

Blood+ score **8.5**

Great animation, story grabs you immediately

Did they cast from a homeless shelter?

Released By	Sony Pictures Home Entertainment
Volume	Continuing series
Running Time	22 minutes per episode
Episodes	50
Rating	TV-MA
Available	Saturdays @ 12:30am ET/PT

ogle this

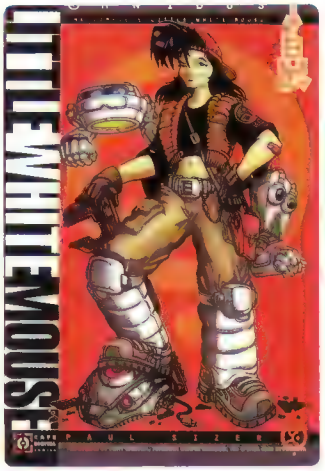
Worlds of Amano

read this

Avril Lavigne's Make 5 Wishes

Pub: Del Rey Manga **Rating:** 13+ **Avail:** Now
Story/Art by: Camilla d'Errico **Genere:** Fantasy/Drama

Proving she's more than just a rock star and a (very) pretty face—as if that's not enough—Avril Lavigne's recent manga co-venture (for which she chose M5W from myriad of choices) with Del Rey, their first American publication, is out now and something special. Full-color, embossed cover and all. Make5Wishes.com

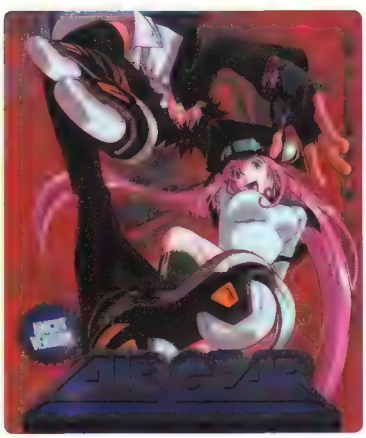


Little White Mouse Omnibus

Publisher: Café Digital Comics | **Rating:** Youth 10+
Story/Art by: Paul Sizer **Genre:** Sci-Fi **Avail:** Now

In space no one can here you chew gum… Just ask 16 year old Loo, stuck on a remote automated mining satellite. Surviving in such a harsh environment is one thing but escaping before its life support systems go down is another. Find out how she fares in this 440 page tome that's as fun as it is dramatic. You won't even think about putting it down. www.paulsizer.com

watch this



Air Gear

ADV Films | TV MA | 100 minutes | Volume 2 | Available Now

Like the Jet Set Radio Future sequel I never had, ADV's Air Gear rages on. Ikki's still not a Storm Rider, but that doesn't make his god-given gift to shred any less obvious. Too bad he's attracted the wrong kind of attention. Don't let those girls down, Ikki!

Guyver

ADV Films | TV MA | 100 minutes | Volume 3 | Available Now

There's a reason beyond its built-in fan base that Guyver is among 2007's most popular new series: People love monsters and Guyver does carnage-covered sci-fi right. Picture a mixture of Spider-Man and Power Rangers with ample parts grisly horror.

Coyote Ragtime Show

ADV Films | TV 14 | 100 minutes | Volume 2 | Available Now

10 billion dollars is a lot of motive, but you won't have to pay near that to see who gets the loot in ADV's latest. If you haven't caught the CRS bug yet, get on it! It's sexy, action-stuffed and will definitely win the award for best dismembered head in a supporting role.

Noein

Manga Video | NR | 126 minutes | Volume 3 | Available Now

Break out the Ouji boards, 2007's most originally ethereal drama is heading into volume 3, wide-screen enhanced and psychologically charged. The rift is open and the future of two worlds hangs in the balance. There's nothing quite like it.

Dragon Eye

The Eye Has It

Hazy, flighty, and irrepressibly cheerful, Issa Kazuma also happens to be one of the finest "Dracule" hunters in Mikuni City. Dracules are people or animals that have succumbed to the mysterious "D Virus," a disease that transformed the majority of the world's creatures into slavering monsters, and one that spreads on contact and has a 100 percent infection and fatality rate. While the last remaining vestiges of humanity huddle in cities, elite warriors known as VIUS, who possess a natural resistance to the virus, use a variety of swords, guns, and magic to battle the Dracules and prevent the spread of the disease.

Kairi Fujiyama's *Dragon Eye* traces the intertwining stories of Issa, new recruit Leila, and the other members of Issa's handpicked "Squad Zero" as they complete missions and begin to unearth a larger, more tangled conspiracy. *Eye* manages to sneak in some lighthearted moments as well: I laughed out loud when one of the biggest, baddest Dracules turned out to look like a giant chicken albeit one with diamond-hard skin and razor pinfeathers.

Crisply illustrated and clearly written, *Eye* tries hard to blend sci-fi, sword and sorcery, and character comedy into a harmonious whole. Unfortunately, in doing so Fujiyama has created a story that seems derivative and unoriginal. Don't get me wrong: *Eye* remains great fun, an enjoyable read on a rainy Saturday afternoon, but you can't really expect much more from it than that.

Read it if... You have an aversion to giant mutant chickens.

Dragon Eye	score 7.5
Publisher	Del Rey Manga
Volume	1
Story	Kairi Fujiyama
Art	Kairi Fujiyama
Genre	Fantasy
Rating	15+

Princess Resurrection

One Twisted Tiara

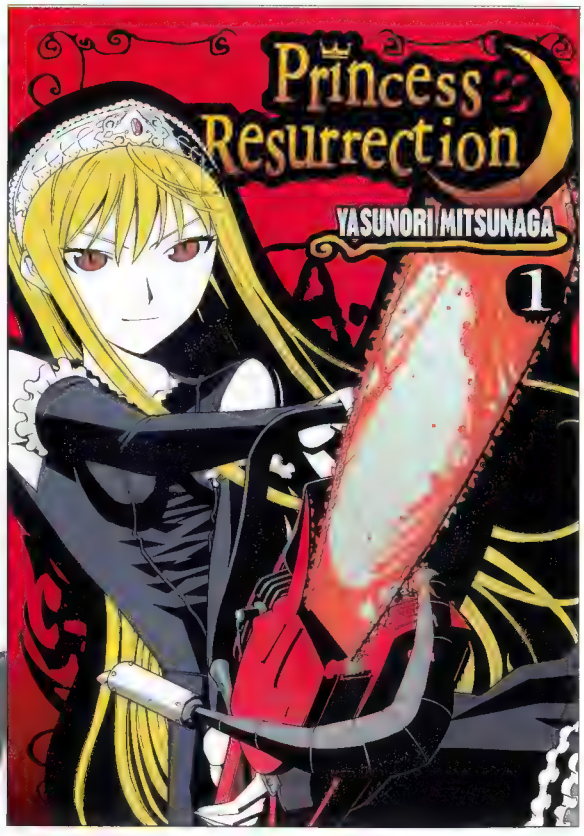
Hiro's got a problem. He's . . .well, *dead*. Or at least he should be. While trying to find the location of his new job, he got run over by a truck and wakes up in the hospital morgue. Dazed, the young boy leaves the hospital still covered in his own blood. He manages to find his employer, Princess Hime, just in time to see her take on a pack of slavering wolves and an angry werewolf. Compelled to protect her, Hiro ends up dead again, though his sacrifice allows Hime to finish off the werewolf.

You see, after his accident and unbeknownst to Hiro, the Princess gave him some of her own blood to drink, morphing him into a "blood warrior." Bound to the person whose blood they drank, blood warriors are "semi-immortal," meaning they can come back to life if they keep drinking their master's blood. The "semi" is really important, because Hiro does manage to die, often, and in a variety of creative and gruesome ways—all part of the fun of Mitsunaga's *Princess Resurrection*.

With invisible men, werewolves, vampires, and more, *Resurrection* feels somewhat like a manga parody of the horror genre. Princess Hime, the daughter of the King of Monsters, has to rely on her trusty android Flandre and reluctant blood warrior Hiro to protect her from these beasties. I'm dying (pun intended!) to know who the king of monsters turns out to be—my money's a cross between Boris Karloff and Uncle Fester.

Read it if... You want to see what Simon Belmont's dream girl looks like.

Princess Resurrection	score 9.0
Publisher	Del Rey Manga
Volume	1
Story	Yasunori Mitsunaga
Art	Yasunori Mitsunaga
Genre	Horror adventure
Rating	15+



Ghost Rider

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

I must tread carefully as I make this point. I wouldn't want to be skewered with a protractor for thinking that Superman isn't a literary masterpiece. The way I see it, what makes the majority of mainstream American Comics so appealing is their cornball nature, such as the whole geek-saves-the-day-and-gets-the-girl motif. Fringe titles like *Shaolin Cowboy* and *The Maxx,* and many a mainstream book such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *The Darkness* are smartly written, but when it comes to the world of mainstream DC and Marvel, we're talking extra cheese. If you agree with me on this, then *Ghost Rider* is the perfect comic book movie, because it comes across just like the comic. Tongue planted firmly in cheek, it isn't the least bit dark, like say *Constantine*. It's more camp then anything. The characters are simple and shallow and rarely say anything intelligent. The story is tripe, the adversary a laugh riot of bad clichés (not to mention chest hair and makeup) and the effects as painfully obvious as they are fun. It's cheeky, and pardon the expression, boneheaded: 100% certified American popcorn munchin' gold. I really like what the filmmakers have done here, if indeed this was their intent. If not than irony is hard at work. The way I see it the Spider-Man and X-Men's of the world aren't necessarily great *comic book* movies. They're more just really great movies—polished Hollywood films that aspire far beyond anything the comics have to offer. I looked at a Spider-Man comic recently and, man, they were ugly and made Harry Potter look like Caligula. Taken at face value and judged as such, *Ghost Rider* is a good time. Cage plays it perfectly and I can't get enough of the film's old west twang; I just wish there was more of it. What I don't dig though is shite casting and there are two potential deal breakers at work here: Wes Bentley as Blackheart looks like a deceased Grease reject and is about as threatening as a Teletubbie, and Peter Fonda as the devil is nothing short of side-splitting. Did *Escape from L.A.* not teach them anything? Was Carrot Top busy? Mark Steven Johnson finally scored a sequel-worthy property that made money. It's time to ditch his casting director and cook up a scarier villain for the sequel. Like a hamster. **Dave Halverson**

Arthur and the Invisibles

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Rated:

I felt a personal connection with *Arthur and the Invisibles* for the simple reason that unlike the best CGI films that boast fun for the whole family, *Arthur* (like *Titan A.E.* and most recently *TMNT*) leans more toward the adult side, which is also why it tanked just like *Titan A.E.* (we finally scored a victory with *TMNT*). It's a shame that the filmmakers didn't have the foresight to make their creations PG-13 or even R and reap the benefits of their smart animated tales. Perhaps *TMNT* and the upcoming *Gachaman* (from the same team at Imagi) will further turn the tide. Back to *Arthur*: Freddie Highmore is the thinking mans child actor and he's surrounded by vocal gold in DeNiro, Bowie and Madonna. Mia Farrow is wonderful too although there's no denying that the film is bogged down with too much live action—all the more evident on DVD. The character design is sophisticated in ways few if any American CGI artisans have mustered and the story, although simplistic, is masterfully produced with scads of read-between-the-lines goodness. Pity the extras are so sparse. One would think that the producers would have piled them on in the hope of the boosting the gross, but perhaps there's a two disc collectors set in our future. I can't recommend *Arthur and the Invisibles* enough…Pick up the game while you're at it. **Dave Halverson**

Linda Linda Linda

Directed by:
Starring:
Released By:
Running Time:

Mere days before Shiba High's school festival, three girls–Kei, Kyoko, and Nozomi–find their band in ruin as the other two members drop out for different reasons. Just as the girls are ready to decide to give up their spot in the festival's musical performance, Kei announces to the school's staff that they'll still perform. Kei agrees to cover for their missing guitar player, even though she typically plays keyboard, but they still have to somehow find a replacement lead singer. By mere chance, that role falls to Son, a Korean exchange student who can barely speak Japanese.

Linda Linda Linda is an enthralling look at the world of rock and roll on a small, personal scale, as the four students struggle to not only pull the band back together from its near collapse, but also keep themselves from breaking from the pressure of it all. The movie is infused with great music from beginning to end, from the classic tracks the band–The Paranmaum as they are newly christened–decide to play from legendary Japanese punk group The Blue Hearts, to the tracks specifically created for the movie by James Iha of Smashing Pumpkins fame. **Eric L. Patterson**

05_07 NICK DES BARRES
PLAY JAPAN EDITOR

The PLAYSTATION 3: Dead, or Just Resting?

A friendly troll war between Nick Des Barres and Casey Loe

CL: Have you seen these NPD numbers? 130,000 systems sold in February? 20K a week in Japan? The PS3 is DEAD.

ND: Well, you know, it *does* cost 599 US dollars, and there isn't a whole lot to compel in the game library just yet, though I would argue it has a better lineup than the Wii at this point. It's foolish and presumptive to write the PLAYSTATION 3 off less than half a year from its release. Give it until the holiday season, at least!

CL: Those were fine arguments in the PS2 era, but it ignores the crucial difference that the PS3 is being beaten--badly--by two serious competitors who are able to counter Sony's every move. Sure, Sony can lower the price, but Nintendo and Microsoft will just counter with their own price drops which, unlike Sony, they can afford to do. And the 360 and Wii software libraries will improve too--and at a faster rate than the PS3's, since no 3rd party developer in its right mind is going to make a PS3-exclusive title after looking at these numbers.

ND: There are several reasons why the PLAYSTATION 3 can still win numerical superiority when all is said and done. The first, and most obvious, is Final Fantasy XIII. That game isn't going anywhere, and since Japan has shown quite clearly that it completely spurns the Xbox 360, the country's only option for HD gaming is the PS3. Secondly, I don't think anyone can predict whether or not the infatuation with Wii will continue. It may have broken into new markets, but as a video game fan nothing yet on the system has convinced me to abandon my buttons and analog sticks. Third, over 33% of Japanese homes now have HDTVs. As that number rises, the demand for an HD content engine–that's the Triple–will rise exponentially. SDTVs will become effectively useless in 2011, you know.

CL: I imagine Square-Enix is taking a wait-and-see approach on FFXIII exclusivity... I'm sure they'd like it to be a PS3 exclusive, but I doubt they'd endanger their franchise by releasing a numbered sequel on a system with an installed base of less than 10 million. But yes, the PS3 probably will carve out a decent position for itself in Japan. Too bad the market for next-gen games in Japan is so small that high-budget PS3 exclusives won't ever be a sound investment. Instead, they'll need to go where the money is—America. Which means making a 360 version. And non-exclusives won't move hardware. As for HDTV penetration, your point completely disproves itself! Obviously owning an HDTV doesn't make you a videophile, because 33% of the Japanese sure didn't rush out to pick up a PS3!

ND: Who can say yet that PS3 games won't ever be financially sound? For me, the PLAYSTATION 3 hasn't even launched yet. If it has to subsist on 360 ports and first-party exclusives for its first two years, so be it. I am certain the system will pick up steam in Japan starting in 2008, and continue to build steadily by simple virtue of it being the only alternative to Wii available. You say owning an HDTV doesn't make you a videophile, but even the blind can tell the difference between 480p and 1080p on a modern television. Price drops and an expanding library will make the PS3 irresistible. How else will the Japanese get to play their RPGs? We've seen what the series they love (Dragon Quest, Musou, Bio Hazard, Tales) have become on Wii.

CL: I guess the question is, can any system succeed with a "slow burn" strategy? Platforms have rarely overcome bad momentum in the past, but with the rise of handhelds and the increasing importance of the US market, everything is so screwy now that analogies to the past may not be worth much. Still, I have trouble believing that was Sony's intent all along. How can they realistically lower the price of the PS3 without the economy of scale created by high consumer demand? And with so few developers devoting themselves to PS3 exclusive development, how will it produce superior-looking titles that will convince Xbox 360 owners to pick up one up, and new consumers to buy a PS3 instead?
You may have a point that the Wii's current level of success may not be sustainable in Japan—at least as far as games go. I'm sure it will rule the casual-sports, party-game, aerobics, yoga, and home-brain-training marketplace, but hopefully gamers will reject these major franchise titles that have been reduced to 480p on-rails shooters and slashers and demand real sequels on an HD platform. I just hope Japanese 3rd parties are still interested in *making* such games two years down the road.

"...I suppose it's true--anyone who claims to be able to read the future from third- and fourth-month sales is lying..."

ND: To answer your last question first, Xbox 360 owners may never be convinced to pick up a Triple. I expect this round to end up looking quite a bit like a three-way tie; neither Sony–nor anybody else–is going to be in a dominating position like we saw with the last two generations. In any case, Sony will lower the price of the PS3 because they have to. That's the only chance they have of success, and already Cell processors are being made with a 65nm process, with plans for 45nm. As Blu-ray players become more prevalent, the cost of the drive will also go down. But this is really all semantics: As the last two years have shown, nobody can predict s**t in this industry. Who could have ever guessed that non-games, spurred by the Brain Training movement, would have taken over Japan with such a ferocity? I can only pray the country collectively wakes up and realizes that while it may have found a hot new sub-market, its *real* customers have been around for a couple decades now, and we demand games.

CL: I suppose it's true--anyone who claims to be able to read the future from third-and fourth-month sales is lying, as evidenced by the fact that no two industry prognosticators seem to see the same outcome. In fact, the biggest issue may not be the platform war, but the war of philosophies it's entangled with. And the philosophy 360 and PS3 fans share—gorgeous, high-budget games in traditional genres—is facings some tough competition from handhelds, casual games, and edutainment software. Look at the defection of Dragon Quest to handhelds... Is any real gamer happy about that?

ND: I can't imagine that they would be, no. I'm certainly not. It's often easy to forget that this *is* a business, and if the market is telling game companies they want simple mini-game pap and pottery training sims, than that's what we'll get. Maybe the industry really did spiral out of control, and developers simply can't handle the raw power of the Triple and 360. Perhaps this is their retaliation. Perhaps profit margins are too small on big-budget, story-driven games. Perhaps gamers are simply a dying breed. It's all so confusing. My head hurts. Hold me.

CL: [Hugs Nick, both weep softly]

"Excellent!" The New York Times "Kicks ASS" IGN.com

SAMUEL L. JACKSON IS AFRO SAMURAI®

ALSO STARRING: RON PERLMAN & KELLY HU
SCORED BY THE RZA

EXCLUSIVE TO DIRECTOR'S CUT

**15 Minutes of Never Before Seen Animation,
Exclusive Artwork from the Creator, Takashi Okazaki,
Interviews with the Cast, Including Samuel L. Jackson, Ron Perlman,
Kelly Hu and The RZA, Character Commentary**

BUY IT ON DVD

MAY 22 2007

AFROSAMURAI.COM

AS SEEN ON SPIKE GET MORE ACTION

GONZO

FUNIMATION ENTERTAINMENT A NAMCO CORPORATION COMPANY

© 2006 TAKASHI OKAZAKI. GONZO. SAMURAI PROJECT. Licensed by FUNimation® Productions, Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

SNK VS. CAPCOM
CARD FIGHTERS DS
TM
WHEN WORLDS CLASH... ONLY THE GREATEST CARD FIGHTERS REMAIN!
Use favorite SNK or CAPCOM characters to battle it out in the Card Fighters Tournament
400 different cards to use, collect, and trade
Use strategic card arrangements to win
Combine cards for added value and strength
Unlock the Secrets of the Card Tower
Challenge a friend with the wireless head-to-head Combat Mode
TEEN
T
Partial Nudity
ESRB CONTENT RATING
www.esrb.org
NINTENDO DS
SNK PLAYMORE
www.snkplaymorusa.com

© SNK PLAYMORE 2006 © MOTO KIKAKU. © CAPCOM CO., LTD.2006 © CAPCOM U.S.A., INC. 2006 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. "SNK" is a registered trademark of SNK PLAYMORE CORPORATION. "CAPCOM" is a registered trademark of CAPCOM CO., LTD. "SNK VS. CAPCOM CARD FIGHTERS DS" is developed by SNK PLAYMORE CORPORATION under license from CAPCOM CO., LTD & CAPCOM U.S.A., INC. TM, © and Nintendo DS are trademarks of Nintendo. ©2004 Nintendo. The ratings icon is a registered trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.

Made with love by

Our goal is to preserve classic video game magazines so that they are not lost permanently.

People interested in helping out in any capacity, please visit us at retromags.com.

No profit is made from these scans, nor do we offer anything available from the publishers themselves.

If you come across anyone selling releases from this site, please do not support them and do let us know.

Thank you!